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A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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*A Tombstone & Speedy Novelet by* **W. C. TUTTLE**

## MAN BREAKER RANGE

*Novelet by* GUNNISON STEELE

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# EXCITING WESTERN

Vol. 16, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION JANUARY, 1949

## WISE MEN OF WISDOM CITY

By W. C. TUTTLE

Nobody in Paradise Valley believes that the two rollicking waddies are really sleuths, but the rustlers they are after sure find it out in a hurry! A complete Tombstone and Speedy novelet 13


TOO SMART FOR KILLING ..... Jackson Cole 39
The three survivors of Lawson's gang had the loot

THE QUICK AND THE DEAD (Novelet) ..... Allan K. Echols 42
Jim Goodspeed had to brave fire and lead before he could hope to reach his own special paradise!

MAN-BREAKER RANGE (Novelet) ..... Gunnison Steele 58
When they pinched Johnny Thunder's poke, the gang of crooks found it packed with sixgun lightning!

THE COWBOY HAD A WORD FOR IT ..... Chuck Stanley 73
Our tenderfoot learns some Colorado place names

A PAINFUL EXTRACTION ..... Norman N. Tolkan 77
Catching a bank robber is just like pulling teeth

ONE WAS A MURDERER ..... Luther Locke 81
The true story of a puzzling Southwestern mystery

REVENGE OF WINKY WALL ..... Ben Frank 87
Winky comes to Trigger Valley on a killer search

NEW YEAR'S DECISION ..... Johnston McCulley 96
Trooper Sperry faces a Comanche-fighting problem

TRAIL BLAZERS ..... Captain Ranger 6
A meaty department devoted to the great outdoors


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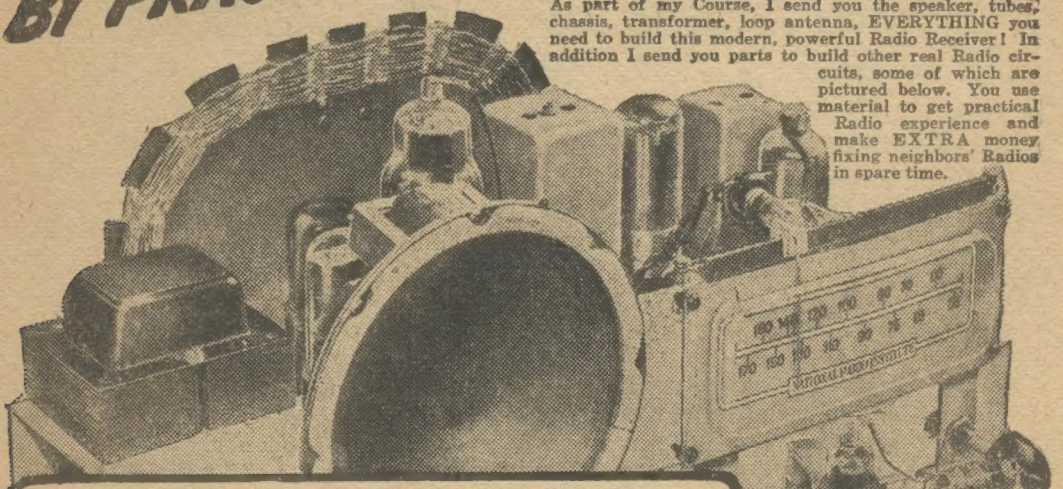

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*A Department for Readers Conducted by CAPTAIN RANGER*

FOLKS, prospecting is, for those who like the outdoors, a fascinating and still important occupation in the West. And with most metal hunters gold is likely to be the main objective. That's okay.

But there are two kinds of gold deposits, two kinds of gold prospecting—placer gold and lode gold.

Placer gold, once a workable deposit has been found, can usually be pretty easily handled on a small scale even by a novice. All it involves is washing the gold particles out of the sand and gravel with which they are intermixed by panning, or better still a rocker or a set of sluice boxes. And the latter are not hard to build.

Lode gold prospecting is a different story. In placer mining it is simply necessary to wash the gold particles out of the dirt or gravel with which they are mixed. Lode mining on the other hand is hard rock mining. It involves gold in veins in rock, and the rock must be mined to get the actual gold bearing ore out of the ground and up to the surface where the ore can be processed for final recovery of the precious metal. In a hunt for a lode gold deposit there is always the possibility for a fortune, if the search is successful.

That's the big hope that keeps most prospectors going, despite all hardships, or initial setbacks.

## A Prospecting Case History

Perhaps the best way to explain just how an hombre should go about looking for a lode gold deposit is to give an actual example—a case history so to speak of a real prospecting venture that we know about personally.

It doesn't explain everything about lode gold prospecting. Men who have spent their lives in the game are learning something new every day. But it does show one way that paid off. And the method used is one in general practice. It has proved itself efficient.

This particular gold hunter was prospecting the section around Goldfield, Nevada, some years ago. Gold had already been found in richly paying quantities in the district. Leasers and miners were shipping out high grade ore from several properties. The gold fever was running high among local prospectors.

At the start the fellow we're talking about had made a good move. He was working a region known to be gold-mineralized.

## A Lonesome Bump

First thing he did was look the entire section over carefully to get the lay of the land, familiarize himself with the outstanding rock formations and so forth. Next he decided to concentrate his search on a lonesome looking bump in the desert known as Sandstorm Hill, a low-rising prominence that stood about 200 feet above a rocky gulch or dry wash. A large quartz vein outcropped near the top of the hill.

Others had prospected the place before. An extensive series of cuts had been made on the vein, and samples taken out. Investigation showed that these samples had been assayed, and most of the assays revealed gold—values ranging anywhere from a few cents to a dollar or so a ton of ore.

That was nothing to get excited about. It would cost more than the assay value to mine a ton of that ore, let alone ship it to a mill for treatment. The earlier gold hunters had given up Sandstorm Hill as a bum steer. But not this particular prospector, whose name as I recall it was Davis.

## Where There's Smoke

Davis (I think that's right) figured that where there was smoke, there should be fire. He calculated that somewhere along the vein there ought to be an ore-shoot—that is, a longitudinal section where the gold deposition was concentrated richly enough in the

(*Continued on page* 8)

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## TRAIL BLAZERS

*(Continued from Page 6)*

vein to make a mine, and working the vein a paying proposition.

He didn't fool with the vein right off. The outcrop was already gopher-holed to a fair-you-well with the blasted hopes of previous prospectors.

Instead Davis—his technique showed smart prospecting—went down to the foot of the hill just above the gulch to a point where the surface overburden had not been disturbed. With a shovel he removed the surface cover to a depth of a few inches. Then with that removed he took a shovel full of earth and placed it in a marked and labelled back, showing the location from which it had been taken and giving the sample a number.

### Fifteen Samples

Next he proceeded on a level line parallel to the edge of the gulch for about fifty feet and took a second similar sample of dirt. He repeated this process until he had perhaps ten or fifteen samples. Then he took all the samples back to his camp where he had set up a tub of water and panned each of them carefully in the tub, watching for traces of free gold particles that might have been contained in the dirt.

Most of the samples showed a little gold just as the vein outcrop had at the top of the hill when assays were made. There was still nothing to get excited about, other than the knowledge that at least some gold was there and maybe he was on the right track.

Davis went back and took more fifty foot apart samples on the same contour level just above the edge of the dry creek. He panned each one separately as he had the first batch.

Finally he struck a point along the side of the hill where the dirt showed a marked increase in its free gold content. With the trail warming up, Davis took closer samples —at twenty foot spacings—and panned these.

### The Starting Point

This painstaking work disclosed one spot where the gold recovered was noticeably richer than at any other place. Using this spot as a starting point, Davis' next step was to climb about twenty-five feet higher up the hill and start another line of twenty-

*(Continued on Page 10)*

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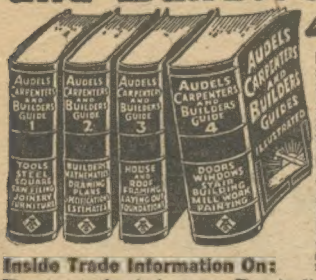


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## TRAIL BLAZERS

*(Continued from Page 8)*

foot spaced sample holes parallel to the first line.

In turn the best hole in this line was carefully marked and another row started twenty feet above the second line. By this method the prospector was able gradually to trace out the boundary of the fan shaped gold flow that had at some time in the prehistoric past worked down the hill, obviously, he reasoned, from the gold-carrying vein at its crest.

The steadily richer dirt samples finally led Davis to a point on or close to the crest of the hill. But it was a point at which the quartz vein did not outcrop—that is, show on the surface.

Persistent digging disclosed the vein not far under the ground. Samples of ore taken from this section of the vein which had been overlooked by earlier prospectors because it didn't show above the ground later revealed that Davis had discovered what he was looking for—a rich ore shoot. But definitely. In a little over five months' mining, the ore shoot yielded about $250,000 in gold in high grade shipping ore.

Not all lode gold hunts have such a happy ending. But this one did. And that's exactly how the search was carried out. It's as fine an example of successful lode gold prospecting as I know of, and an excellent lesson in general lode gold prospecting procedure.

First is the getting into a location known to be gold-mineralized or having a favorable chance of carrying gold. Second is the search for "float" or free gold in the earth below a vein outcrop. Sometimes "float" is found as gold-carrying stones, or chunks of vein outcrop that have broken off and been carried downhill during ages past, or even carried into the stream bed of creeks in the bottom of an adjacent gulch.

### The Final Step

The third and generally final step is the Sherlock Holmes business of tracing the float to its richest point of concentration, then following it up to the actual discovery of the vein or lode itself.

There are of course other pointers that should be borne in mind. For instance, in any territory, new or old, there are certain conditions that are basically favorable or

*(Continued on page 107)*

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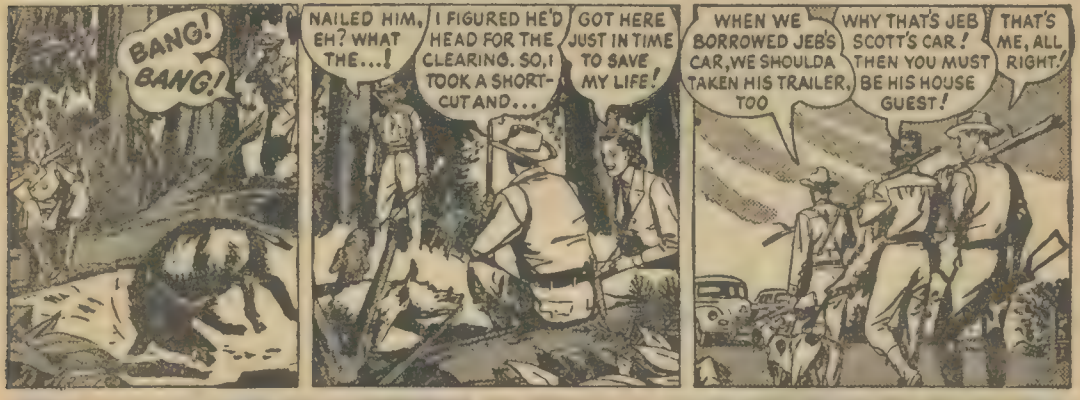
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NAILED HIM, EH? WHAT THE...!
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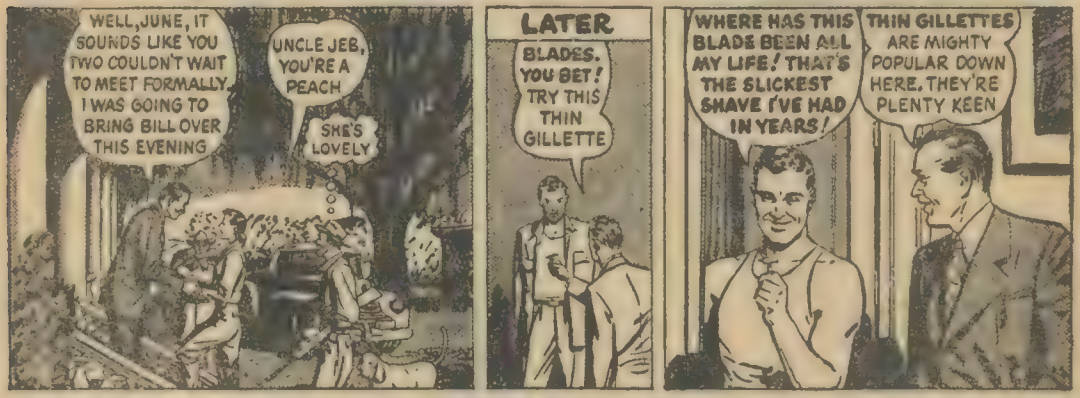
WHY THAT'S JEB SCOTT'S CAR! THEN YOU MUST BE HIS HOUSE GUEST!
THAT'S ME, ALL RIGHT!


WELL, JUNE, IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU TWO COULDN'T WAIT TO MEET FORMALLY. I WAS GOING TO BRING BILL OVER THIS EVENING
UNCLE JEB, YOU'RE A PEACH
SHE'S LOVELY
LATER
BLADES, YOU BET! TRY THIS THIN GILLETTE
WHERE HAS THIS BLADE BEEN ALL MY LIFE! THAT'S THE SLICKEST SHAVE I'VE HAD IN YEARS!
THIN GILLETTES ARE MIGHTY POPULAR DOWN HERE. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN

HE'S A FINE YOUNG MAN. EXCELLENT APPEARANCE AND VERY INTELLIGENT
I KNEW YOU'D LIKE HIM, COLONEL. I'VE APPROACHED HIM REGARDING A JUNIOR PARTNERSHIP
YOU ENJOY SWELL, EASY SHAVES... QUICK AND CLEAN... WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY ARE THE KEENEST BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD AND FAR OUTLAST ALL OTHERS. MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, THIN GILLETTES CANNOT SCRAPE OR IRRITATE YOUR FACE. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT NEW-10 BLADE PACKAGE
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
10-25¢
NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

A Tombstone and Speedy novelet by

**W. C. TUTTLE**

# WISE MEN of WISDOM CITY

*Nobody in Paradise Valley believes the two rollicking waddies are really sleuths, but the rustlers they're after sure find it out!*

## CHAPTER I

### *Fired and Rehired*

IN SPITE of the fact that it was a hundred and ten in the shade, the sky brassy, the landscape more or less gray, "Tombstone" Jones and "Speedy" Smith gazed upon a very blue world, as they sat in the shade of the little depot at Broken River. Heat waves did a devil's dance down the deserted street. A passenger train halted long enough to deposit a lone passenger in Broken River, and went on. Coal smoke eddied

around the two nondescript cowboys, adding to their discomfort.

Tombstone Jones was approximately seven feet tall in his boots and battered sombrero, as lean as a hound pup. In fact, Tombstone was about as meaty as a fish-pole. Speedy Smith was almost an exact replica of Tombstone Jones, except for height.

Speedy was five feet, seven inches tall, and about as thick through as a two-by-four scantling.

In garb they were exactly alike—faded, tight-fitting overalls, faded shirts, well-worn high-heel boots, battered hats.

TOMBSTONE JONES

Around the thin waist of each were home-made gun-belts, sagging from the weight of wood-handled forty-fives in short holsters.

Without shifting his weary-looking eyes, and barely parting his lips, Tombstone said monotonously:

"Read her ag'in, Speedy."

"Why?" asked Speedy wearily. After a long pause, Tombstone said:

"There might be a loop-hole."

"Loop-hole!" snorted Speedy disgustedly. "Why, you—you ignorant, knot-headed—"

"Don't try to soft-soap me," interrupted Tombstone. "Reason is, I'm a-graspin' at straws. I shudder to the core of me, thinkin' of takin' a job, dry-nursin' cows ag'in. Forty a month! Speedy, they're tryin' to shove us back in the gutter. I dunno about you, but I'm lookin' further than the end of my nose."

"If yuh are," said Speedy, "you'll need a telescope."

"Aw, my nose ain't that long. Go ahead and read it."

Speedy sighed deeply and produced a letter. The reason Tombstone didn't read it for himself was because he couldn't read. For a long time, these two, unbelievable as it may appear, had been employed as range detectives by the Cattlemen's Association. Speedy read:

"'Due to the fact that there is no criminal activity within the association, and therefore no occasion for us to keep you two under salary, you are herewith relieved of duty. You are not exactly discharged, but rather laid aside for an indefinite period. You are at liberty to accept employment elsewhere.

"'If, at any time in the future, we should be so hard up for investigating talent that we just don't care who we hire, you may expect to hear from us again. I am enclosing final checks for both of you!' "

Speedy folded the letter and put it inside his shirt—not for safe-keeping, but because he was too weary or lazy to reach down to his overall pocket.

"It don't sound good," said Tombstone. "That can't be an answer to the telegram you sent a while ago."

"I'd call that clever deduction," sighed Speedy. "I told him we was ready to take a new job—and mebbe I was right—a job punchin' cows."

"Mebbe he'll change his mind," said Tombstone hopefully.

"Just about as much chance as—oh-oh! What's this?"

THE young man who had gotten off the train came around the corner of the depot, carrying two rather expensive-looking bags, set the bags down carefully, straightened his tie and looked them over curiously. He was quite tall, also quite thin, with a long, sober-looking face and rather thick lensed glasses. He was also pink.

"I beg your pardon," he said quietly, "but did either of you gentlemen ever hear of Henry Van-Jones?"

"Huh?" grunted Tombstone. "Ol' Hank Jones? Why, that's m' uncle Hank! He's been missin' for years!"

"Hank Jones?" repeated the young man. "No, I—I never heard of Hank Jones. My uncle was named Henry. I—

I distinctly mentioned the name. The last name was Van-Jones. Hyphenated, you know."

"Hank was spifflicated, prob'ly," said Speedy.

"Van-Jones," repeated the young man. "There is a hyphen between Van and Jones. I hope you understand. It is the little bar which keeps the two words apart."

"Mebbe it's the heat," said Speedy. "Come sundown, and you'll be all right again. Set down and rest yore feet, stranger."

"I am looking for Henry Van-Jones. The depot agent said I might ask—er—Tombstone Jones, I believe he said the name was."

"I'm him," said Tombstone.

"I am he," smiled the young man, correcting Tombstone's English.

Tombstone stared at him for several moments.

"Take it easy, Tombstone," Speedy said. "He's awful young, and it's awful hot."

"I am Ursel Reinhart Fish," announced the young man.

Speedy rubbed the palm of his hand over the butt of his gun, as he eyed the young man. Tombstone shifted cautiously. Heat does queer things to tenderfeet, and you never know—they might get violent.

"Sounds kinda musical," remarked Speedy. "What do yuh do on Friday?"

"I beg your pardon."

"We ort to kind of start gatherin' up the raveled edges," said Tombstone. "Yo're lookin for an uncle who has to have a bar to keep his last two names apart. Yore name's Fish."

"That is correct, sir. Ursel Reinhart Fish, of the Boston Fishes."

"Well," remarked Tombstone, "yo're a danged long ways from water, I'll say that for yuh, my friend. Meet Speedy Smith, one of the Oklahomy Smiths. My name's Jones, and my family is worldwide."

"I am very glad to meet both of you, gentlemen."

Ursel Reinhart Fish sat down on one of his bags, brought out an ornate cigarette-case, carefully extracted a cigarette and lighted it.

"The man at the depot window told me that Tombstone Jones might have known my uncle. His name is—"

"Henry Van-Jones," added Speedy, "and we don't know him. Out in this country we use bars to get us together—not keep us apart. What does yore uncle do?"

"I do not know what his occupation may be, sir. You see, I am Ursel Reinhart Fish, the Second. My father is dead. My mother passed away a year ago. Presently, I am alone in the world, as you might say. My grandfather was Ursel Reinhart Fish, the First."

"There was seven of us boys, as I remember it," said Tombstone. "Pa couldn't count, I don't reckon, so he jist named us and forgot the numbers. He

SPEEDY SMITH

told us that that sooner or later we'd prob'ly all git numbers. Mr. Fish, how come yuh stopped at Broken River?"

"Well," Ursel said and grinned slowly, "I couldn't recall the name of my destination; so I simply told the train conductor that it was some godforsaken place in this country, and he said there wasn't a more godforsaken place than Broken River."

"Check," said Speedy. "That bein' yore wish, you've got it."

Tombstone started to say something, but the depot agent came hurrying around from his office, bearing a telegram.

"Glad yuh hadn't pulled out, Jones," he said. "I just got this telegram from a feller named Jim Keaton. Do yuh know him? Oh, sure yuh do—you sent that wire to him." He handed over the tele-

gram to Tombstone who promptly handed it to Speedy. Speedy read it. It said:

FIND TOMBSTONE JONES IF IN YOUR TOWN. TELL HIM IGNORE LETTER AND WIRE ME AVAILABILITY. URGENT I HEAR FROM THEM AT ONCE. BILL ME FOR EXPENSE IN LOCATING THEM.—JIM KEATON.

Speedy said, "I wonder what he wants. Wait!" Speedy took out his check and examined the amount, shook his head and put it back.

"I thought maybe he'd overpayed us. Nope, it's somethin' else."

"What's availability?" asked Tombstone.

"Webster says," informed Ursel, "it is the quality of being available."

BOTH cowboys stared solemnly at Ursel for several moments.

"Oh, that's jist swell!" exclaimed Tombstone "I love the way you explained it, Ursel. Now, what the devil does it mean?"

"He wants to know if you are free to work for him," explained the depot agent.

Speedy wrote the telegram, which said:

HAVE IGNORED THE LETTER AND ARE LOADED WITH AVAILABILITY. ARE WE WRONG IN EXPECTING A RAISE IN SALARY.—TOMBSTONE AND SPEEDY.

He read it to Tombstone, who said, "Why didja put that last line in it, Speedy? You know he won't raise us?"

"I put that in," replied Speedy, "so he'll be sure the telegram is from us."

"Like a code," smiled Ursel. "Clever, I'd say. By the way, what is your occupation, Mr. Tombstone?"

"Me?" queried Tombstone soberly. "Why, I furnish graveyards."

"You surely don't mean—oh, I see! That is why they call you Tombstone. You furnish tombstones and all that sort of thing."

"No," said Tombstone. "Yo're wrong, my friend; I furnish them a reason to buy tombstones. You'd be surprised."

"Yes, I—I believe I would. Is there a place in this—er—Broken River where we might find something cold to drink?"

"Ursel," said Tombstone beaming, "there's somethin' about you that I like—and it ain't yore name. Suppose we call yuh Friday? It's easy to remember. Friday Fish."

"I never thought of that." Ursel smiled. "After all, what's in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. Do you know Shakespeare, Mr. Tombstone?"

"No, I don't, Friday. Lotsa folks I don't know. I jist say howdy, and let it go at that. We'll be back in a little while," he told the agent. "Hold all telegrams for us—or anythin' else that comes along. C'mon, Friday. You mentioned a cold drink."

They came back in about two hours, stopped outside the office and sang a chorus of "Git Along Little Dogies," before coming into the place. Ursel Reinhart Fish applauded so hard that he almost fell off on the tracks. There was a telegram from Jim Keaton, which read:

YOU ARE WRONG RE SALARY. AM RUSHING LETTER INSTRUCTIONS TO WISDOM CITY. KEEP YOUR EYES OPEN AND YOUR MOUTH SHUT. THIS IS DANGEROUS JOB.

"Where-at on earth is Wisdom City?" asked Tombstone.

"We would like to know," added Ursel Reinhart Fish owlishly.

"Well, I'll tell you," said the agent. "You go from here to Stove Pipe Creek. That's straight south of here. Then you cross the divide into Paradise Valley. I've heard that Wisdom City is just about seventy-five miles from here, as the crow flies."

"As the crow flies," said Speedy dismally. "That makes it at least a hundred and fifty."

"Wisdom City and Paradise Valley," said Ursel. "Hm-m-m-m. Thish is what I would call a great coinshi—coinshi, coinshid'nce."

"Yeah?" queried Tombstone. "How come, Friday?"

The young man grinned. "Tha's where I want to go," he said. "I recall the name now. That is my deshtination."

"Wait a moment," said Speedy. "You ain't got no horse and you ain't got no saddle."

"Wrong," declared Ursel Reinhart Fish soberly, "I haven't any horsh, and I haven't any saddle."

"The trouble is," said Speedy, leaning against the counter in the depot office, "you mix too much heat with too much

A bullet from over the brow of the hill just missed Tombstone and slapped into the body of the steer

tequila—and that's what comes out. Ursel, my boy, a horse will cost a hundred dollars, a saddle at least sixty."

Ursel took out a bill-fold, carelessly extracted two one hundred dollar bills and handed them to Speedy.

"Make it two hundred," he said. "I want a pair of those little wheels to put on my heels. They sound good."

"Well, may I be the victim of a vinegaroon!" whispered Tombstone. "Speedy, our one pair has done blossomed into three of a kind! But listen, Friday, have you ever rode a horse?"

"Have I ever ridden a horsh?" asked Ursel Reinhart Fish disgustedly. "Have I ever—no, I haven't, come to think of it. But all one has to do is—er—ride, I suppose."

"Friday, with all yore eddication—yo're a fool," said Tombstone.

Ursel nodded. "It makes me very happy," said the young man. "In fact, all my life I'sh been too civilized. Being a Fish, you know, one must be exshemplary. There are traditionsh—lotsh of them. On the impulsh of the moment, I came to this country—and I am glad. How soon can we acquire—horsh?"

"Being a fish," said Tombstone. "Ain't that somethin'? What's a tradition?"

"It's got somethin' to do with a fish," and Speedy. "Let's go and find a horse for the infant. I reckon he'll want a gun, too."

"Well," said Tombstone solemnly, "Jim Keaton says this is a dangerous job, but there's no use makin' *him* the job."

## CHAPTER II

### *Vanishing Cows*

WISDOM CITY was not far from the Mexican border, a place of plenty heat and not too much water. The main street was narrow and crooked, dusty, the houses and signs sand-blasted. But Wisdom City was the center of a good cattle district, and enjoyed a certain prosperity.

Into Wisdom City came Tombstone Jones, Speedy Smith and "Friday" Fish, erstwhile Ursel Reinhart Fish, the Second.

None of the Boston Fishes would have recognized him. In fact, it was just a bit difficult for anyone, who had known him before, to recognize him now. As Speedy remarked:

"Friday looks like a accident that can't find no place to happen."

Clad in a soiled, wrinkled shirt, overalls, high-heel boots and a sombrero, he might have passed as a native, except that Arizona sun does queer things to the skin of those uninitiated to heat, wind, and general wear and tear.

Friday's eyes were swollen, giving him a sort of Oriental leer. Both ears were blistered, his lips swollen, and he ached all over from the unaccustomed rack of a traveling horse. Friday had long since become oblivious to mere saddle-sores.

They stabled their horses at a feed corral and went up the street to the Wisdom House. Friday had trouble navigating, but he made it. Tombstone had told Speedy:

"If I didn't have a hunch that the kid's human, I'd have shot him on top of the summit and eased his misery."

"Well, he's about as near a fried fish as I've ever seen," said Speedy, "but, darn his pink hide, he don't complain. I like him."

Old Cochise Collins, long-time proprietor of the Wisdom House, looked them over appraisingly. He squinted closely at Friday and shuddered a little.

"My good man, we seek accommodations," Friday said loftily.

"Any delay may prove fatal," added Speedy. "If this here companion of ours ever gets off his feet, I'm scared."

"He needs a doctor," observed Cochise, taking the dog-eared register from under the counter.

"I need a drink," declared Friday. "Speedy, will you register for me, please. I—I really can not hold the pen."

Speedy signed all their names. Friday said, "I am from Boston, you know, Speedy."

"We don't care where yo're from and we ain't goin' to ask where yo're goin'," said Cochise. "You'll want two rooms, eh? Well, that will be four-bits apiece in advance."

"Four-bits?" queried Tombstone. "Yuh mean—it costs four-bits apiece to sleep here?"

"Let us not quibble over small items," said Friday. "Here, sir, is ten dollars. When I have had sufficient sleep, I shall be glad to renumerate you further. After I have had a good bath—"

"Friday," said Tombstone quietly, "jist try and keep a stiff upper lip—there ain't no bath. Am I right, Mister?"

"We don't clean 'em—we jist sleep 'em," replied Cochise. "Yuh git used to it after while."

"Good Heavens, this is unthinkable!" exclaimed Friday. "What on earth do people do for baths?"

"What are you goin' to do?" asked Cochise dryly.

"C'mon." Tombstone grinned. "It ain't bad, after yuh get used to it. Mebbe we'll have a heavy rain pretty soon."

They got Friday to his room, yanked off his clothes and let him slide painfully into bed. Speedy sat down on the edge of the bed and rolled a cigarette. Friday wasn't sleepy, he was numb. Speedy said:

"Now that we've got yuh down, feller, why didja ever come to this country, Friday?"

"I realize," replied the young sufferer, "that explanations are in order. As I told you before, I am Ursel Reinhart Fish, the Second. My grandfather was the first. Both my mother and father have passed on. I am an orphan, and, until a short time ago, I believed that I am without a living relative. While we Fishes do not brag of our wealth and position, we do brag about our family. However, I am not a poor man—no thanks to my own efforts.

"However, some time after the death of my mother, and while going through the family effects, I discovered a letter, written by my unknown-to-me Uncle Henry Van-Jones. Most of this letter has been destroyed, but there was enough left for me to discover that my uncle, who evidently was dying, had left me a legacy.

"The nature of the legacy was missing. However, the letter was sent from Paradise Valley, but undated. My friends, somewhere in this country is a man of my own flesh and blood. At least, he must have been my mother's brother."

"So you want to find out what he left yuh, huh?" remarked Speedy.

"My dear Speedy, I am not at all interested in what he left to me. I merely wish to find him, if he is alive, or find out more about him, in case he passed on. I am not mercenary, I assure you."

"Let him go to sleep," said Tombstone quietly. "He's swallered a dictionary and it's beginnin' to gripe him."

"We'll make him a deal," suggested Speedy. "He don't want what his Uncle Henry left him, and he can't do much by himself. If we help yuh find Uncle Henry, Friday, will you give us what he left to you?"

"Gladly," yawned the young man, "And with my blessing."

"We'll take the inheritance," said Tombstone. "Speedy, let's go knock off a couple yards of shut-eye for ourselves."

"If I need you, I'll ring," said Friday.

"Now he's a bell," sighed Tombstone. "C'mon, Speedy."

* * * * *

"Shorty" Lorimer, owner of the Lazy L, was mad—all five feet, four of him was mad. Too, Shorty was almost that big around. "Hunk" Haverty, the sheriff, and "Silent" Sims, the deputy, knew that Shorty was mad. That deduction did not require a maximum of brains, because Shorty was not at all subtle. He hammered his fist on the sheriff's desk.

"I tell yuh, I demand that you stop it!" he roared. "Looky!" his voice broke to a hoarse whisper, "in six months I've lost half my cows. I hired the best danged detective there was in the association—and what happens?"

"Yeah, we know what happened, Shorty," said the sheriff.

"Yuh do? That's remarkable! Especially remarkable, when there's such a lack of brains. You actually know that my detective was murdered in cold-blood. Well, blast yuh, why don'tcha do somethin' about it? Don't set there and nod! By the great horn spoon, I'm goin' to go out and—"

Shorty realized the futility of further speech, whirled and took one long, swift step, and rammed Tombstone Jones squarely in the equator. The collision doubled Tombstone like a jack-knife, but it knocked Shorty back into the office, where he landed heavily on the seat of his pants. Tombstone, unbalanced forward, came right on in, trying to draw wind into his depleted lungs. Speedy came in behind him, leaned

against the doorway and looked soberly at the astonished sheriff and deputy.

"What happened?" asked Shorty huskily.

"The door was blocked, I reckon," said Silent. "You didn't even look where yuh was goin', Shorty."

Tombstone took a deep breath, stood up straight and rubbed his thin waistline. Shorty got up, looked up at Tombstone Jones, carefully stepped around him and went out of the office.

"Good mornin', officers," said Speedy gloomily.

"Why, howdy," replied the sheriff. "Nice mornin'."

Tombstone said, complainingly, "Why don't they grow 'em tall enough to hit yuh above the waist-line?"

"After thinkin' it over," replied Silent, "it 'pears to me that you got entirely out of hand in yore youth, pardner. Set down and git on a level with common folks."

Tombstone and Speedy sat down, and Tombstone said:

"Did I hear somebody say that a cow detective had been killed?"

"That's right," nodded the sheriff. "Buckshot in the back."

"That's revoltin'," declared Tombstone gravely. "Was there anythin' personal about it, Sheriff?"

"He asks things like that once in a while," explained Speedy.

"I meant," said Tombstone, "was he killed by a friend, or was it jist some criminal who got scared and pulled the trigger?"

"That last part sounds the best," said Silent. "I never seen a detective yet what had a friend. I'd almost as soon herd sheep."

"You'd prob'ly be more of a success," said Speedy.

"We came over from Broken River," explained Tombstone. "Got here late yesterday afternoon."

"I seen yuh comin' from the feed corral," said Silent. "Three of yuh, and one walkin' a rail-fence."

Tombstone grinned. "That was Friday Fish. He wasn't drunk—he was kinda saddle-sprung. Nice feller, when yuh git to know him, too."

"Gettin' back to shop-talk," said Speedy, "what was a detective doin' around in these parts, if you don't mind sayin'?"

"Well," replied the sheriff dryly, "after Shorty Lorimer's talk a while ago, I don't reckon it's any secret. Shorty's been losin' cows, and the association sent Oren Miller over here to try and find ways and means to stop said practice. He got stopped—cold."

"Things like that kinda disgust me," said Tombstone. "I hate violence in any form. And, if yuh don't mind, I'll also state that I hate to get butted in the equator. Who did yuh say it was who showed goatish tendencies a few minutes ago?"

"That was Shorty Lorimer, owner of the Lazy L," said Silent.

Two men came down the sidewalk, their spurs jingling, and stopped at the doorway. The sheriff said, "Howdy, Jeff. C'mon in."

"I'm awful busy, Hunk," replied Jeff Murtin. "We just throwed a bunch of cows into the loadin' corral. Cars'll be in this afternoon, and I thought you'd like to inspect the bunch before we start loadin'."

"Yeah, that's right, Jeff," agreed the sheriff. I'll have Silent down there. Howdy, Pokey."

The cowboy with Jeff Murtin said, "Hyah, Sheriff," and the two men hurried away. Tombstone went to the doorway, ducked his head a little, as he glanced at the two men going up the street.

"Who's the string-bean?" asked Tombstone.

"His name's Pokey Peterson," replied Silent. "Why?"

"I thought he was somebody I knowed."

"The other feller is Jeff Murtin, owner of the Box M."

"Lots of cows shipped from here?" asked Speedy.

"Quite a lot. I s'pose I'll have to eat dust all afternoon at that danged corral. Blasted laws! Make an officer see the brand on every cow that goes into a car."

"It keeps a feller from shippin' other folks' cows," said the sheriff. "That's what I don't understand about Shorty Lorimer's claims. He says they're takin' his cows of all ages. You can alter brands on young stuff, but it takes an altered brand a long time to grow out and look like the original. Pers'nally, I think Shorty is all wrong. You better go down to the corral, Silent."

Tombstone and Speedy went to the post office and got the letter which Jim

Keaton had mentioned in his wire. It read:

Oren Miller, the smartest operative we ever had, was murdered in Wisdom City two days ago. He was there to investigate alleged rustling of Lazy L cattle. See Shorty Lorimer, owner of the outfit and he can give you details.

Work carefully and don't take chances. Miller was above average in intelligence, but he only lasted a week. Keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. Don't wire or write me. Finish the job, if you can, and advise me later. Might be a leak in telegraph or post office, so don't take a chance.

Tombstone listened carefully, while Speedy read it aloud. Speedy put the letter in his pocket, without comment. Finally, Tombstone said: "How does he know whether the telegraph or post office leaks? And what has a few leaks got to do with us—it ain't rained here since Sittin' Bull laid down."

"He means," explained Speedy soberly, "that somebody in the telegraph office or the post office might tell somebody that we're who we are. How can anybody be as dumb as you are?"

"Well," sighed Tombstone, "I ain't smart enough to answer that one, Speedy. Anyway, what does he want us to do—find out who is stealin' Lazy L cows, or who killed Oren Miller?"

"From his letter," replied Speedy, "I think he wants us to save our own lives. Keep yore eyes open and yore mouth shut!"

"You ain't givin' me orders, are yuh, Speedy?"

"I'm just sayin' what he wrote. Yuh know, Tombstone, sometimes I think that Jim Keaton thinks we're dumb."

"You'd almost think so, the way he writes. Well, what'll we do first, find the rustlers or the murderers? We've got to make up our minds. I wonder why they shot Miller."

"Because he was an association detective."

"O-o-oh—that's why! Well! I must say that's a puny thing to kill a man for."

"Let's go find Friday and see if he's still alive."

Tombstone grinned. "You know, I kinda like him."

"Why?" asked Speedy, as they walked back to the hotel.

"Well, it's just sort of a feelin' that he ain't got no more brains than I have."

"How do'yuh figure that calamity for

None of the Boston Fishes would have recognized Ursel now

the poor kid?'

"Family pride. Got all the money he wants, don't want what his uncle left him, but he jist wants to find his uncle, because he's related to a fish. Only relate he's got left, he says."

"And," pointed out Speedy, "if we find Henry Van-Jones for him, we can divide what Uncle Henry left to him in his will. You don't know—Uncle Henry might be worth a million. And he ain't no fish, Tombstone—their name's Fish."

"Yeah, I know that. Van-Jones? Say, I wonder if he ain't related to me. The last part's the same as mine."

"Ain't you got enough relates?" asked Speedy. "Every Jones you hear about is yore long lost uncle. Yo're the losin'ist family I ever heard about. Let's find Ursel Reinhart Friday Fish."

## CHAPTER III

### *Pokey's Memory Is Faulty*

DOWN at the restaurant they found the young man in question, eating breakfast. He was barely sitting on the edge of the chair, and seemingly not enjoying it a bit. He grimaced at them, and managed to get to his feet.

"Excuse my physical attitude this morning," he said wearily, "but I find myself rather set in the joints. Time, I suppose, will unlock these painful mysteries, but at present I am one bundle of assorted aches."

"And yuh kinda hurt all over, too, eh?" queried Tombstone.

"Yes, I might add that statement. How do you find things?"

"Oh, jist by lookin'," replied Tombstone blandly. "Quite a town."

"Oh, yes, quite, I suppose. What do we do next?"

"You ain't able to do nothin' but set," said Speedy.

Friday Fish flinched. "Sit?" he asked. "My dear Speedy!"

Speedy smiled slowly. "Listen, Friday," he said soberly. "When you shuck off them aches, you'll be the toughest old pelicano that ever made a mark in the mud. You'll forgit yore Uncle Henry, forgit that yo're a Fish, and take right off across the dry land."

"You paint a wonderful picture of my future, Speedy. No, I believe that, as soon as I find out about Uncle Henry, I shall be content to leave this country to more hardy souls that me."

Tombstone slapped him on the back, and Friday almost collapsed.

"Git yore hat," said Tombstone, "and we'll go down to the loadin' corral, where they're loadin' cows for market. It'll do yuh good to watch 'em load, and you'll find out why they call 'em punchers."

"Well, I may as well absorb all the local color possible," Friday said with a smile. "Shall I wear my spurs?"

"Oh, shore," drawled Speedy. "Them fences might be slippery."

The train of stock cars was pulling onto the siding at the loading corral, as they got there. Speedy and Friday sat down on the plank top of the corral, but Tombstone went wandering around to the chute, where Silent was sprawled on the fence, looking over the milling cattle. A dusty-faced cowpoke came to say something to Silent. He was the same man Tombstone thought he knew—the man they said was "Pokey" Peterson.

"Hyah, pardner!" Tombstone said.

Peterson looked sharply at Tombstone.

"I don't reckon I ever met you," he said stiffly. Silent started to introduce them, but Tombstone said:

"Me and him have met before, Silent."

"Where?" asked Peterson.

"When you was workin' in a barbershop in Agua Verde."

"I'm no barber," denied Peterson.

"I found that out—you cut my hair."

Peterson laughed shortly and shook his head.

"Sorry, my friend, but my name's Peterson and I ain't never been in Agua Verde."

"My mistake," said Tombstone soberly. "Whatever became of Lou Haden?"

"Lou Haden? Why, the last I heard—Haden, did yuh say? I never knowed any Lou Haden."

"Pokey Colby!" chided Tombstone accusingly.

"All right." Pokey began to grin. "Suppose I *was* a barber?"

"In name only, yuh know."

"Well, maybe I wasn't too good with

a razor. I used the name of Colby, because I didn't want folks to know I was a barber. How come yo're down here, Jones?"

"That's a secret," replied Tombstone. "Gover'ment work, yuh know."

"Yea-a-ah? Huh! Who's the crippled tenderfoot with yuh? He looks awful pink."

"That's what he is—and he's plenty smart, too."

Pokey mopped the back of his hand across his dusty face.

"Well, we'll start loadin' as soon as the car's spotted, Silent," he said. "Glad to have seen yuh again, Jones."

"And that," said Tombstone to himself, "is a bigger lie than I could tell—offhand."

THEY spent about an hour at the loading corrals, eating dust and watching the milling cattle, as the punchers drove them up the loading chutes into the slatted stock cars. As they walked back to the post office, Friday said:

"Very interesting, indeed. But my main object of undergoing all this misery is to find my uncle, or find out something about him."

"We'll start the investigation," agreed Tombstone. "Yuh know he sent that letter from Paradise Valley, huh?"

"Yes, I believe he sent it from here."

"And his name was Henry Van-Jones, huh? Friday, didja ever stop to realize that maybe he wasn't a-livin' here under his right name?"

"That," declared Friday, "is rather ridiculous. The Fishes and Van-Joneses are too proud to use any other name."

"We all have a certain amount of pride," remarked Speedy, "but sometimes it's easier to change names than it is to get a new neck."

The elderly postmaster listened to their queries, thought it over and shook his head.

"The name is hyphenated," said Friday.

"It is? I thought it was Van-Jones?"

Friday patiently explained the hyphenated name. The postmaster listened patiently.

"I've been here, man and boy, for twenty-five years," he said, "and I ain't never seen that name. We'd call it Van Bar Jones out here. I'll tell yuh somethin', son, if yuh had a description of him it'd work better. Could be that he was Old Hank, the sheepherder, or Old Hank Jones—or anythin' else he'd like. We ain't particular what brand a man puts on himself, as long as it ain't the Mark of Cain."

"He was Henry Van-Jones," declared Friday patiently and a bit stiffly. "A Van-Jones would always be a Van-Jones, no matter what happened."

"Obstinate, eh?" remarked the postmaster.

Friday ignored the query, and they went out.

Speedy said, "If that old postmaster never heard of him, I'm scared we're sunk, Friday."

"Could yore uncle read and write?" asked Tombstone.

"Read and write? Why, Tombstone, of course he could!"

"Well, I was just thinkin' that maybe he never got any mail."

Cochise Collins, the hotel-keeper, listened to their questions regarding Henry Van-Jones, shook his head, knocked the dottle out of his pipe on the floor.

"Huh! I seem to remember a Hank Jones," he said thoughtfully. "Mebbe it was Hank Smith, or again it might have been Jim Hanks. Hank somethin'."

"Hanks," said Speedy.

"Yo're welcome, I'm sure."

Friday said, "If you gentlemen will excuse me, I would like to lie down for a while. Sitting on that corral fence, you know. How long does it require for one to become normal?"

"In this country yo're lucky if yuh ever do," said Speedy.

Friday ate supper with them, but retired to his room, where he used up part of a bottle of horse liniment Speedy advised him to buy. Shorty Lorimer was in town, still bemoaning the fact that he was being robbed. Tombstone wanted to have a talk with Lorimer, but Speedy advised against it.

"We don't know who's who around here," argued Speedy. "Jim Keaton warned us to be careful. If we're seen talkin' to Lorimer, yuh never know what'll happen. I'd rather keep m' mouth shut and live, than to open her up wide and swaller a lily."

They found Silent Sims in the sheriff's office, all tired out from his labors at the loading corral. He looked them over curiously, as he propounded the question: "Which one of you three are a detective?"

Tombstone glanced around, hitched up his belt and said:

"There's only two of us, Silent, and who ever said that?"

"I'm countin' the tenderfoot," replied Silent.

"Well, go ahead and tell us who said it," insisted Tombstone.

SILENT opened a drawer of the sheriff's desk, took out a dingy-looking envelope and and took out a half-sheet of soiled paper. On the paper, crudely penciled in capitals, was this message:

ONE OF THEM THREE AT THE HOTIL ARE DURTY DETEKTIFFS. WARN THEM THAT ONE DETEKTIF HAS DIED AND THAT WE STILL KILL DETEKTIFFS. WE WON'T WARN AGIN.

Speedy read it aloud. There was no signature.

Silent said, "The window was open this afternoon, and we found it on the floor. Hunk says he thinks somebody is foolin', but told me to give it to yuh. It's a cinch you two ain't detectives, and so it must be the tenderfoot."

"Them rustlers ain't only crooked—they're crazy," declared Speedy. "That poor kid ain't no detective. You tell 'em, will yuh?"

"How can I tell 'em?" asked Silent.

"Yeah, that's what makes it bad. No name, no address—nothin'."

"How," asked Tombstone seriously, "can yuh be so sure that me and Speedy ain't detectives?"

"Everythin' in the world is ag'in yuh bein'," replied Silent. "Looks, actions, brains. You two fellers couldn't detect a black bear in a herd of white mice. I ain't sayin' that in a derrogary manner, yuh understand—I just mean that yuh couldn't possibly be."

"You ain't never seen us dressed up, Silent."

"No, I ain't. Pokey Peterson says you two are here on a secret mission for the Gov'ment."

"Did you tell him what it was about, Tombstone?" asked Speedy quickly. "You know blamed well it's got to be kept secret."

"I didn't tell him," denied Tombstone. "Yuh see, we have to keep still about it, until we finish in a town. We finished here today."

"Yuh did?" queried Silent. "Well, can yuh tell me now?"

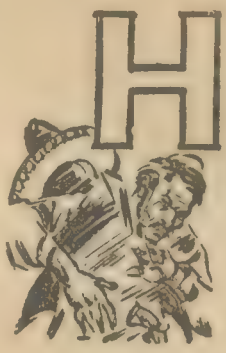
"Can't do no harm, I don't reckon. Yuh see, Silent, Uncle Sam is goin' into the sheep business, and there ain't enough herders. Our job was to go into different places and check up on deputy sheriffs who ort to be herdin' sheep, instead of obtainin' money under false pretenses as officers of the law."

Silent stared at Tombstone, his lips moving, as he tried to digest this information.

"We'll see yuh later, Silent," Speedy said, and they walked out.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Hot Reception*



HUNK HAVERTY, the sheriff, stepped out of the corridor into the office, where he had been listening to the conversation. He didn't say a word—just stood there, looking at Silent Sims. Suddenly his face contorted and tears came to his eyes.

"You think yuh're funny, don'tcha?" Silent said.

Hunk shook his head and wiped away the tears.

Silent said, "They're lyin', I'll betcha."

"Lyin' about what, Silent?"

"About the Gov'ment bein' in the sheep business."

Hunk sat down and filled his pipe. He said:

"Pers'nally, I'd say that the rannahan who wrote that note is barkin' up the wrong tree. It's a cinch these two ain't even related to a detective. They ain't even the same species. You've seen that feller they call Friday. What do yuh think?"

"If anythin', he's a worse specimen than these two, Hunk."

"Well, what's he doin' here, anyway?"

"Speedy told me that he's lookin' for a uncle of his'n. Some rich, old coot by the name of Van-Jones—first name Henry."

"Van-Jones? Henry Van-Jones? Ain't nobody around this county by that name, Silent."

"That's what I told him."

"Van-Jones. There's somethin' about that name—no, no, I don't believe I ever

heard it before. The Jones is familiar. I wish I knew who shoved that warnin' note through our window. Yuh know, Silent, we better concentrate on keepin' them three idiots from gettin' killed. Them cow-lifters have got the idea that one of them men is a detective, and we can't prove to them that they ain't. Next thing we know, we'll have another dead man on our hands."

"Concentrate?" asked Silent. "Yuh mean—dry-nurse them three?"

"Any way yuh want to handle it, Silent."

"Aw-w-w! Hunk, I can't—listen! You don't know what yuh ask. In the first place, they wouldn't stand for it. Imagine me—bein' a bodyguard for Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith!"

"All right, take over Fish."

"Hunk," said Silent huskily, "I'd as soon herd sheep."

"Well," said Hunk dryly, "I hear the Gov'ment is runnin' a lot of sheep and—"

Silent's comment on the situation was unprintable, as he stalked out of the office, and went to the Trail Saloon. Tombstone and Speedy were watching a draw-poker game, so Silent sat down near the doorway to think over his heart-breaking assignment. Shorty Lorimer was in the game, as was Jeff Murtin, who had just shipped a train of beef to an eastern market.

Tombstone noticed Silent and went over to sit down with him.

Silent said, "Ain't you worryin' about that note, Tombstone?"

"Not until they select their man," replied Tombstone gravely. "Yuh know, they said one of us three. Soon's they select the one they want—"

"But maybe they won't announce their choice."

"Yeah, I never thought of that. Huh! That makes it different!"

"Have yuh told Friday Fish about the note?"

"No, we ain't seen him. He's prob'ly asleep in his room."

"He ort to know, hadn't he, Tombstone?"

"Well, I dunno. If they're goin' to kill him, maybe it's better if he don't know it ahead of time. He'd just worry."

"Maybe yo're right," sighed Silent. "See yuh later."

Wisdom City was uninteresting on a weekday night, and Tombstone and Speedy drifted back to the hotel where Cochise Collins was sprawled in a chair, reading an ancient magazine. Tombstone asked him again if he'd ever known a man named Henry Van-Jones. Cochise hadn't.

He said, "That Fish person asked me the same question," and turned back to his book.

"I'm sleepy," yawned Speedy. "Might as well go to bed."

"Yeah, I reckon so," nodded Tombstone. "I been wonderin' if we ort to tell Friday about that note."

"Won't it scare him stiff?"

"Mebbe. It scared me. Anyway, I think he ort to know."

"Well, it's a shame to wake up a feller jist to tell him he's liable to git shot at any moment."

They went up the open stairway to the second floor, and down the uncarpeted hallway, their boots hammering on the old pine boards. It was quite dark in the hallway, and they almost went past Friday's room.

The door was unlocked. They walked in and about midway in the room, and

[*Turn page*]

HEADACHE
RELIEF!
UPSET STOMACH
JUMPY NERVES
THANKS TO FAMOUS BROMO-SELTZER
Millions turn to Bromo-Seltzer to relieve ordinary headache *three* ways. It's famous for giving fast, pleasant help. Caution: Use only as directed. Get Bromo-Seltzer at your drugstore fountain or counter today. A product of Emerson Drug Co. since 1887.
BROMO SELTZER

Speedy started to light a match, when the cyclone struck. A gun-barrel rasped against Tombstone's head, bounced off his shoulder, and somebody sent Speedy crashing against the bed. That was when the battle really started. Speedy rebounded into somebody, and started working with both hands and both feet, while Tombstone, groping in the darkness, found an antagonist, and also started to work him over.

Not a word was spoken. The one chair in the room was reduced to kindling-wood, the dresser and mirror parted company, and it sounded as though somebody was tearing the foot-board off the bed. Muttered curses, heavy breathing, the thudding of blows, and the scraping of boot-soles on the floor, and the agonized gasp, as somebody got punched around the waist-line. Tombstone was knocked back against the wall, went flat on the floor, but came up fighting. He grasped an opponent, staggered back and fell into the hallway.

Tombstone had both arms locked around the man, who was kicking him in the shins violently, but Tombstone was too numb, too blinded to care about a few kicks. Down the hallway they went, doing sort of a cross between a waltz and a fox-trot, struck the railing at the head of the stairs, tore it loose and went into the lobby below in a sort of double swan-dive.

Cochise Collins was dancing a sort of jig, waving his magazine and yelling, "Stop it! Stop it, I tell yuh! What on earth are yuh tryin' to do?"

Another apparation showed up at the top of the stairs. It was Speedy Smith, and he had a man by the shirt-collar, dragging him along. Down the stairs they came, Speedy walking backwards, dragging his victim, and they ended up at the bottom of the stairs, with Speedy sitting on him, and looking around vacantly.

"What on earth went wrong?" yelped Cochise. "Stop it!"

"I—I—I've stopped!" panted Speedy.

Tombstone sat up, trying to pump air into his lungs. His victim got slowly to his feet and looked around. He was Silent Sims—what there was left of him. He looked owlishly at Tombstone and over at Speedy. Then he said, "Bodyguard! Bull!" started for the doorway, didn't see the chair at all, and fell over it with a crash.

Slowly Speedy got up and peered down down at his victim, who said, very hoarsely, "What have I ever done to deserve this?"

Then Friday Fish sat up. His arms were tied behind him, and his gag, or what had been his gag, was dangling around his neck.

Tombstone stood up weakly and considered the situation. Cochise Collins sat down, the magazine dangling from his fingers. They heard Silent swearing, and turned to see him limping through the doorway.

Cochise said, "Silent acts kinda perturbed."

Some of the bumps on Tombstone's face had been hollows but a short time before, and both he and Speedy were somewhat painted with gore.

Tombstone said soberly, "Speedy, it ain't fair to tie a man's hands, before yuh hit him."

"I feel," declared Friday, "that I have been through something. I feel that every bone in my body has been broken. What happened?"

Speedy removed the ropes from Friday's wrists, leaving the question unanswered.

Cochise said, "I thought a cyclone was sweepin' down the hall. Never had nothin' like that in my hotel before. Well, well! Can't somebody explain what went wrong?"

"Friday," said Tombstone quietly, "maybe you can."

Friday rubbed his sore head, as though trying to collect his thoughts. "It is just like a nightmare," he said painfully. "I was asleep. Yes, I must have been asleep. When I awoke the lamp was lighted and two masked men were with me. They—they warned me to not make a sound, made me sit at the edge of the bed, while they tied my hands and wrapped that cloth around my mouth.

"One of them said—it does sound rather far-fetched—but I'm sure he said, 'We must be sure, before we kill him. We shall take him away, where we can ask him plenty of questions.' I wanted to tell them that they were making a terrible mistake, but I was not able to talk, you see.

"'Suddenly a man walked in. I believe he was the officer, whom you call Silent. These two men pointed their guns at him and took away his gun. He asked them what was going on, and they said,

'The less you know, the better it will be for you, sir.' I—I suppose they must have heard someone coming, because one of the men said to the other, 'Blow out that lamp, and I'll hold this—I'm not sure just what he called Mr. Silent—gun in his ribs.' They blew out the light, and I—I'm not exactly sure what did happen after that. However, I am here—and I—I think I'm alive."

SPEEDY shook his head. "Nothin' like bein' a optimist," he said painfully.

"Yuh shore busted my railin'," said Cochise. "Why didn't yuh come down the stairs? Yuh didn't need to wreck everythin'."

Hunk Haverty came striding into the hotel, stopped short and looked things over. Then he came on, looking at the busted railing and at the three victims of the disaster.

"Howdy, Hunk—you're too late for the show," Cochise said.

"That's what Silent told me, Cochise. What were you two tryin' to do—kill my deputy sheriff?"

"What'd he think?' asked Tombstone.

Hunk sat down and looked them over. Tombstone said:

"Accordin' to the story, Sheriff, two masked men sneaked in on Friday Fish, who was sleepin'. They tied him up, locked his vocal cords with a rag, and was about to take him away, when Silent showed up. They got the drop on Silent, and along about that time me and Speedy showed up, and walked into the dark room. As far as we can figure it out, Hell let out for recess."

"Yea-a-ah!" breathed Hunk Haverty. "Silent seems to have been sprung in several joints, shorted on his wind, and sufferin' from spavins and blind-staggers."

"He'll live, won't he?" asked Speedy.

"Yeah, I reckon he's got a chance, but I'll also bet that next time he'll knock on a door before he opens it."

"That," declared Tombstone, "is on our future itinerary, too."

Next morning Tombstone, Speedy and Friday were really in second-hand condition. They limped down to breakfast and found Silent and Hunk Haverty in the dining room. Silent's left eye was swollen and discolored, and he seemed to have lost all his sense of humor.

"Yuh're awful ungrateful, Silent," Tombstone said. "Them two men might have killed yuh, if we hadn't come along and saved yuh."

"Next time—save yourself. I'll take a chance."

"Have you," asked Hunk, "figured which one of yuh is the detective?"

"We held a meetin' last night," replied Speedy, "but we never was able to make a decision. If we knowed who wrote that note to us, or about us, I mean, we'd put it up to them to select the one they want. We jist can't decide."

"Well, if yuh ask me," said Silent, "they're wrong on all three counts."

"Aw, yuh're prejudiced," said Speedy, attacking his eggs.

Shorty Lorimer came hurrying into the dining room and stopped at their table. He said to the sheriff:

"Hunk, what's all this talk about somebody jumpin' a detective in the hotel last night? Where is he?"

"Shorty," replied the sheriff, "we got a note yesterday, sayin' that one of them three is a detective, and that if they don't shake loose from here, they'll be shot."

Shorty Lorimer looked the three of them over curiously.

"One of *these* three?" he asked.

"Yeah. One of *them* three."

Shorty looked them over carefully this time.

"Hunk, this is worse than I thought," he said finally.

"What do yuh mean, Shorty?"

"My cows are bein' stolen by crazy men!" whispered Shorty.

"How do yuh know?" asked Hunk sharply.

"Only a crazy man would think that one of them three could be a detective. No sane man could."

"Thank yuh, sir," said Speedy soberly. "Yore opinion means a lot to all three of us. Don't it, Friday?"

"If you say so, Speedy. Personally, I have no idea what this is all about. I came here merely to ascertain the whereabouts of my Uncle Henry Van-Jones, and look at me. I am black and blue from head to foot and, although I may be classed with the crazy thieves, mentioned by this gentleman, I am enjoying every twinge of it."

"Now," grinned Tombstone, "if we could only learn yuh to talk English, you'd fit into Arizona like a dancin'-jasper."

"Shorty," said the sheriff, "you didn't

send for another detective, did yuh?"

"I did not; I merely wired the association, telling them of the death of Oren Miller, and askin' information on disposin' of the body. Hunk, this gang is too tough to be handled by anybody from the association. Why, they'd expect the association to send another man, and they'd spot him in a minute."

"Spotted us three," said Speedy sadly.

"They're grabbin' at straws, I reckon," remarked Shorty Lorimer.

"Well, that's all right, if they grab at Tombstone, but what about me and Friday?" Speedy retorted.

Shorty excused himself and went out, shaking his head.

"You've got Shorty puzzled," said Silent.

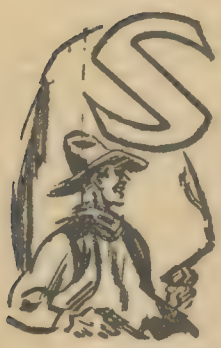
"How about us three?" asked Tombstone. "We're jist as puzzled as Shorty is, I'll tell yuh that."

"I mean—he can't figure yuh out."

"If he could," remarked Silent," we'd elect him Governor of Arizona, jist on his intelligence alone."

## CHAPTER V

*Poor Fish!*



SHORTY LORIMER went to the stage depot and filed the following message to the cattlemen's association:

DID YOU SEND A DETECTIVE HERE NAMED JONES, SMITH OR FISH? RUSTLERS HAVE WARNED THAT ONE IS DETECTIVE AND WILL BE SHOT. MUST BE A MISTAKE BUT DECIDED TO ASK YOU.

Shorty stayed around town for a couple of hours, when he got an answer from Jim Keaton, which read:

NEVER HEARD OF A DETECTIVE NAMED FISH.

Shorty went right down to the sheriff's office and showed the telegram to Hunk Haverty. Haverty said, "That proves that Fish ain't no detective, Shorty."

"Yuh're crazy!" snorted Shorty. "It proves he is. This here Jim Keaton ignores the other two, and says he don't know Fish."

"Mebbe yuh're right, Shorty. But if Fish is a detective, what's he doin' here? He ain't workin' for you."

"Don't ask me questions," complained Shorty. "I've been fightin' my hat for a week. Soon's I get a chance, I'm talkin' to that Fish person."

In the meantime Cochise Collins received a telegram for Tombstone Jones. Cochise was not exactly the soul of honor, but the envelope was stuck too tightly to open. He gave it to Tombstone, who took it up to their room, where Speedy read it aloud. It was from Jim Keaton, and said:

DIDN'T YOU GET MY LETTER? LORIMER WIRES THIS OFFICE ARE YOU TWO DETECTIVES. I CAN'T ANSWER THAT ONE. DO SOMETHING OR PULL OUT BEFORE YOU BOTH GET SHOT. WHO IS FISH?

Tombstone said, "It seems to me that Shorty Lorimer is awful nosey. Askin' are we detectives! Can't he see?"

"That's his trouble, he can," said Speedy dryly. "He wants to know who Fish is."

"And advisin' us to pull out, before we get shot! Fine thing!"

"That idea ain't so far-fetched, at that. You remember what happened last night. If we hadn't showed up, maybe Friday and Silent would have been dead now."

"Instead of all four of us bein' half-dead, huh?"

"That's right. Accordin' to that note, one of us is doomed to die, unless we git real smart and rattle our hocks out of here. The question is, which one of us."

"Well, yuh can't read a man's mind, if yuh don't know which man to operate on, but after what happened last night, I figure that Friday holds an edge against us. How can we tell him who Fish is? Yuh might say he's an heir, lookin' for a missin' uncle. He's got sunburn, spavin, ring-bone, and talks like a dictionary. At least, that'll give him a rough idea of Fish."

"Listen, you ignorant knot-head," said Speedy, "we're in danger. Until them half-witted cow-thieves decide that me and you ain't detectives, our lives ain't worth the skin they're wrapped up in. And with Shorty Lorimer sendin' wires to Jim Keaton, he ain't helpin' me and you none a-tall."

"What do yuh think we ort to do, Speedy? Stand edgeways?"

"That idea's as good as any you ever had. Let's go talk with Friday. He's got to know just how close he is to the Pearly Gates."

"Where's any Pearly Gates? I used to know a Pearly Wilson. My, she was purty! Awful lovely, I'd say. Her father started a town. They called it Gates Ajar. Lovely place, too. One saloon and a jail. I never did see the inside of the saloon."

"C'mon and shut up, Tombstone."

"His first name was Gates, yuh know. Nice feller."

They found Friday in the lobby, all alone. They sat down, and Speedy said confidentially, "Friday, we want to put yuh right on a few things. The cow-lifters think that one of us three is a detective, and they're goin' to kill that one."

"Yes, I understand, Speedy. Mr. Silent explained it to me today. I have thought it over, and I have decided that no matter which one of you is killed, I shall stay with the other."

"That's right nice of yuh," said Speedy, "but that one might be you."

"Me? Why, I never—but that is ridiculous! None of my people—"

"They don't know your people, Friday, and a bullet don't care who it hits."

"Heavens, man! This is a civilized country. We have laws—or do we? I know little about laws. In fact, the Fish family have retained the same firm of lawyers for over forty years."

BUT Tombstone was not impressed.

"You might send 'em a wire," he suggested. "They might be able to tell yuh how to cramp a rustler's gun hand."

"Are you gentlemen really serious about this?"

"We are," they said in unison. Friday blinked thoughtfully.

"I shall leave on the first stage out of here," he said. "Never would I jeopardize either of you boys. What times does the next stage leave Wisdom City?"

"Just about dark, headin' for Clear Springs," replied Speedy.

"I shall be on that stage," said Friday firmly.

There were no tearful farewells. Friday shook hands with them, said that he had paid up their room rent for another week, and gave them his address in Boston, in case they discovered Uncle Henry. He said:

"If they kill either of you, the survivor will then know that I was not the suspect," he said. "I have enjoyed knowing both of you so much."

"Friday," said Tombstone, "yo're all right."

"I realize that," replied Friday. "Good-by, and good luck."

They watched the stage, with its one passenger, rattle out of Wisdom City. Tombstone took a deep breath and said, "Safe at last."

"For the moment, at least," said Speedy. "Here comes Mr. Lorimer. For gosh sake, don't say nothin' that might make him suspect that we're detectives."

Shorty Lorimer looked curiously at them. He had never met them, and seemed undecided just how to open a conversation, until Tombstone said:

"It's a nice day for travelin'."

"Yeah, I reckon it is," replied Shorty. "Where's that galoot headin' for?"

"Boston," replied Speedy.

"Boston, eh? Then he's not a detective."

"Whoever said he was?" asked Tombstone soberly.

"Yeah, explain it to us," suggested Speedy.

"Explain it? How do you explain that letter, threatening to kill one of you three? How do you explain that attack at the hotel?"

"We been wonderin' about that, Mr. Lorimer," said Tombstone. "It was shore unprovoked, if yuh ask me. The note said that one of us is a detective. Well, he's gone, if that's what he was. And now we can have peace and quiet."

"Peace! I tell yuh them rustlers are stealin' my cows!"

"Who are them rustlers?" asked Speedy soberly.

"Who—yea-a-ah! Now, that's a bright question. No wonder them rustlers ain't notched a sight on you two."

"I resent that," said Tombstone quickly. "You implicates that me and Speedy ain't smart enough to be detectives."

"What do *you* think?" asked Shorty.

"After all, what we think ain't no insult to ourselves."

"If you knowed who the rustlers are, Mr. Lorimer, we'd be glad to help yuh," explained Speedy. "We've allus been neighborly."

"Much obliged," said Shorty dryly,

"but I'll get along."

"Without no cows?" said Tombstone.

"Never mind my cows!" snorted Shorty, and went away, heading for the Trail Saloon.

Speedy chuckled.

"That worked out fine," he said. "I was scared for a moment that he suspected us."

"Of stealin' his cows?" asked Tombstone quickly.

"Well, that may come later. Right now, he's sure we ain't detectives. I hope it becomes a general suspicion."

They ran into Hunk Haverty and Silent Sims in the dining room at supper time.

"So they scared Fish out of town, eh?" Hunk said.

"Was that what was wrong with him?" asked Speedy.

"You know blamed well, it was! All right, go ahead and tell us the truth about him. He really is a detective, ain't he?"

"His name ain't Fish," said Speedy soberly.

"Oh, it ain't, eh? What is his name?"

"Sherlock Holmes," whispered Speedy. "Keep it under yore hat."

"Sherlock Holmes!" snorted Hunk. "Sherlock Holmes is dead!"

"Yuh mean—they got him?" asked Tombstone huskily. "On the stage? Oh, I didn't think they'd do it! Shucks, he was pullin' out, just like they ordered and— Hunk, you don't mean it!"

HUNK HAVERTY got up, kicked his chair back and said to Silent:

"Go ahead and eat yore supper—I'm through."

"Well, if that's the way it affects you, how do yuh reckon me and Speedy feel about it?" asked Tombstone sadly. "We've been with him a long time."

Hunk didn't answer; he just drew a deep breath and headed for the door.

Silent said, "I wonder what's eatin' him?"

"Prob'ly somethin' he et," said Speedy soberly.

They were finishing their supper, when Hunk Haverty came back.

"Goin' to try it again?" asked Silent.

"I am not!" snapped Haverty. "For yore information, the Wisdom City-Clear Springs stage was held up about ten miles out of here. Two masked men got the strong-box, which was as empty as yore head, and when Zibe Edwards got back here with the stage—Friday Fish wasn't in it."

"Yuh mean—they got Friday?" gasped Tombstone.

"He wasn't on the stage when it got back here. Zibe don't know whether he lost him at the holdup, or he fell out of the stage on the way back."

"I allus said that Zibe Edwards didn't know much, and this proves it," said Silent.

"Yore opinions don't mean much," said the sheriff. "Listen, you two! Who sent this Friday Fish, or whatever his name is, down here? Don't tell me yuh don't know."

"Well, if yuh don't want us to tell yuh, we won't," said Tombstone. "All we know is he came to find his Uncle Henry. The full name is Henry Van-Jones. Friday says he's been hyphenated."

"If your brains was turned to nitroglycerine, and all poured into a twenty-two shell, the explosion wouldn't kick a bullet out of a six-inch barrel," declared the sheriff.

He didn't wait for Tombstone's retort, but went back to the street.

SPEEDY said sadly, "We've got to git Friday back, Silent. He ain't no more of a detective than we are."

"How can it be done?" queried Silent.

"Well, I'll tell yuh, Silent. First, we'll find out who killed that detective. That'll give us a line on who stole Lorimer's cows, and when we know who they are, we'll go there and tell 'em to give us Friday Fish."

"And Hunk Haverty thinks yuh're dumb!" exploded Silent.

"What do you think?" asked Speedy Smith.

"I don't have to think. I know blamed well yuh are."

"Now," sighed Tombstone, "we're right back where we started from."

"And," added Silent miserably, "right now they're prob'ly sawin' off Friday's ears to make him tell the truth."

"Aw, they wouldn't do that," said Speedy.

"They murdered Oren Miller," Silent reminded them. "If you fellers want that cityfied gallinipper back, yuh better think fast. I'm goin' back to the office now. If yuh get any more bright ideas, go ahead and carry 'em out—I'll remain neutral."

## CHAPTER VI

*Hides and Fists*

OLD Cochise Collins was sympathetic when he heard that Fish had been captured by the outlaws. "They'll prob'ly torture him, until he goes mad," he said. "Jist between me and you, if he's a detective, I'm the King of the Solomon Islands."

"What about us?" asked Tombstone, leaning on the desk.

"You two? If yuh're detectives, I'm the Czar of Rooshia."

"Don't be surprised if there's two, three feet of snow around this knothole infested shack of a Imperial Palace some mornin'," said Speedy morosely.

They went upstairs and sat down in their room to have a smoke. Speedy said, "Tombstone, how could anybody steal a-dult cows down in this country and git away with it? The sheriff's office have to check on every blasted cow that's shipped. Brands don't lie. You can't alter an old brand and not have it look new."

Tombstone shook his head. "I'm usually awful smart on things, but all I can think of now is that poor kid, ignorant as a new-born lamb. At that, it's kinda insultin'."

"How do yuh mean?" queried Speedy.

"Them figurin' that he looks smarter than me and you. I—uh—huh!" Tombstone squinted thoughtfully. After a few moments he grinned. "So I'm dumb, huh?" he said quietly. "Ain't got brains enough to poke a twenty-two bullet out of a barrel! Yea-a-ah! Speedy, I'm gettin' me a idea."

"Cherish it, son," advised Speedy. "It'll be somethin' to show yore grandchildren; the one and only Tombstone Jones idea."

"T'morrow mornin', smarty, we take a ride," said Tombstone. "Let me do the thinkin'."

"And we'll prob'ly ride off a cliff," sighed Speedy, "but go ahead."

Hunk Haverty had an idea, too, which he imparted to Silent Sims.

"Our best bet, Silent," he said, "is to trail them two ignorant saddle-slickers. They'll be ridin', huntin' for this Fish person, and if they've got any ideas, we want in on 'em."

"Since when did them two have a idea, Hunk?"

"Let's call it instinct," grinned Hunk.

It was just after daylight, when Tombstone and Speedy rode out of Wisdom City. Not even a stableman was on duty at the feed corral that early. What they didn't know was the fact that Silent Sims was on duty, and immediately called Hunk Haverty. Their horses were all saddled and ready to go.

"Yuh see?" queried Hunk. "They're movin' early. I'm not so dumb."

"It don't take brains to git up early," sighed Silent. "All it takes is willpower."

"Yeah, maybe yuh're right, Silent. They would have to pick the busiest day in the week to pull us out of town. Everybody waits for Saturday."

Tombstone and Speedy had no definite objective. They merely headed back into the hills. There were plenty cattle, scattered over the hills, but Tombstone was choosey.

"Let's get as far as possible from town," Speedy said. "If we happen to be wrong and get caught, we're in a mess."

"Yeah, that's right. But I'm goin' to be pretty sure, before I waste any lead."

They rode on, higher into the hills, and then swung south, skirting mesquite thickets. It was about nine o'clock, before they found the spotted steer which seemed to satisfy the critical Tombstone. They shook out their ropes, sent the wild-running steer into an open flat, where Tombstone, riding at top speed, flung his loop over the animal's head. A not-too-sudden check spun the animal almost off its feet, and Speedy, riding in close, deftly roped its hind legs and dumped the steer into the dirt.

With Tombstone's horse holding the rope firm, Tombstone dismounted and went quickly down the rope. After a quick examination of the brand on its hip, he called to Speedy:

"This is it, pardner! Hold steady!"

Tombstone's six-shooter blasted sharply, and the steer went slack against the ropes. Speedy spurred his horse in close, got off and took his loop off the hind legs, and at the same time he took Tombstone's rope loose.

"I shore hope yuh're right!" he pant-

ed. "There's a nice hunk of beef for the coyotes."

"It's the only way we can be sure," replied Tombstone, as he drew forth his knife.

*Whap!* A bullet missed the stooping Tombstone and thudded into the body of the dead steer. From over on the side of the hill came the rattling report of a rifle. Tombstone and Speedy sprang away from the steer, as another bullet whispered close to Speedy's ear.

"Start movin'!" yelped Speedy, and broke for his horse.

THERE was nothing slow-moving about either of them in an emergency of this kind. Tombstone made a running mount, swung low in his saddle and headed for the heavy brush, yelling for Speedy to follow him. A bullet cut the sleeve of his shirt at the elbow, but he merely went a little lower, as the running horse ripped through the heavy brush.

Speedy had started to follow Tombstone, swinging low along the shoulder of his running horse, but a bullet smacked into the horse, sending horse and rider in a spinning loop. Two riders were crashing down to the spot from where the shots had been fired, and two more were coming in from below where Speedy and his horse were draped on the ground. The first two were Jeff Murtin, owner of the Box M, with Pokey Peterson, and the other two, coming in from below, were Hunk Haverty and Silent Sims.

The four grim-faced men met at the spot.

"Hunk, we seen him shoot that steer," Murtin said huskily. "Me and Pokey saw them rope the animal, but before we could get down there, that tall hombre shot the brute. Where do they fit in on this rustlin' deal?"

"Don't ask me," said Hunk grimly. "I can't figure 'em out. What brand's on that steer, Silent?"

Silent came back, his eyes puzzled. "It's a Box M," he said. "Yuh know, this don't make sense."

"I'll say it don't!" snapped Martin. "What right have they got to shoot my cattle?"

No one had an answer to that one. Silent knelt and examined the unconscious Speedy, after taking Speedy's gun away.

"He ain't dead," said Silent, "but he's shore knocked stiff. We'll have to get him back to a doctor—fast! My horse will pack double, Hunk. Maybe I can pack him ahead of me on the saddle. Help me put him on, will yuh?"

"I'd shore like to know why they done this," said the sheriff.

"Mebbe Speedy will talk—if he lives," said Silent. "Let's stop arguin' and git him to a doctor."

Silent got on behind the saddle, while the others did their best to get the limp Speedy placed on the saddle.

"How come you two up here this early, Hunk?" Jeff Murtin asked.

"Trailin' them two jaspers!" snapped the sheriff. "Glad we did."

"What'd yuh suspect them of, Hunk?" asked Pokey.

"Nothin'. We just wanted to see what they were up to, Pokey. Let's get goin'."

"Well, I'd like to say one thing," remarked Pokey Peterson, as they rode down the long slope toward the valley, "if we run across that Tombstone Jones in Wisdom City, we better start shootin', 'cause he ain't no shrinkin' vi'let."

"What do you know about Tombstone Jones?" asked Hunk.

"I knowed him in Agua Verde," replied Pokey. "He's not only one of the biggest liars on earth, but he'll shoot. At least, that's the rep he had in that country."

"What was they doin' up here, I wonder," remarked Jeff Murtin.

"Lookin' for that tenderfoot," said Silent.

"Inside a steer?" asked the sheriff sharply.

"Yeah, that was a queer place to look, I'll admit. Anyway, I'll bet Speedy will tell us why—soon's he comes to."

"And he'll prob'ly lie about it," said the sheriff.

Speedy Smith regained consciousness, but without fanfare, found himself in a saddle, with Silent holding him upright. That fall had blacked-out Speedy completely, but it didn't take him long to remember what happened. He sagged in Silent's grasp, and listened to the conversation, which was enlightening, also painful.

"This here galoot is hurt worse'n we thought, I'll tell yuh that," Silent said. "Hope he don't die on my hands. Do yuh reckon Tombstone would go back to Wisdom City?"

"He's dumb enough," replied the sheriff.

"I don't believe he will," said Speedy. "He may be dumb, but he's got some animal instinct that will tell him it would be dangerous."

WITH the sway of the horse Speedy was able to test his legs and arms, but could find no twinge from a broken bone. His neck ached, and there was a dull pain in his left shoulder, but his mind was clear.

They rode into Wisdom City and took Speedy straight to the jail, stretched him out on a cot and sent for the doctor. People gathered around the jail, asking questions. Shorty Lorimer talked with Jeff Murtin, and Murtin told him they caught Tombstone and Speedy with the goods.

"They roped and shot one of my steers," declared Murtin.

"And the tall one got away," added Pokey Peterson. "Yuh ain't seen him lately, have yuh, Shorty?"

"Not since yesterday. But why would they shoot yore steer?"

Jeff Murtin shrugged. "Who knows?"

"Well, ain't anybody goin' to try and run down that High Pockets?"

Jeff Murtin shrugged.

"Shootin' one of yore steers don't make sense, Jeff," Shorty said.

"It sure don't, Shorty. I'll buy a drink."

Silent was standing against the bars of the cell, alone in there, waiting for the doctor, when Speedy said:

"Have yuh got any idea where Tombstone went, Silent?"

"He-e-ey!" blurted Silent. "Yo're alive!"

"Been alive most of my life," replied Speedy dryly. "What's the idea of puttin' me in jail?"

"Yuh're suspected of killin' a cow."

"Oh, yeah—that! Huh! Where's Tombstone?"

"I wish we knew," sighed Silent. "We allus do things by half, thisaway. Want to confess?"

"Yuh're crazy. I ain't got anythin' to say."

"Yuh're hurt worse'n I thought yuh was," Silent said. "Do yuh want the doctor?"

"No, I don't want any doctor, and if yuh don't let me loose, I'll sue the county for everythin' it's got."

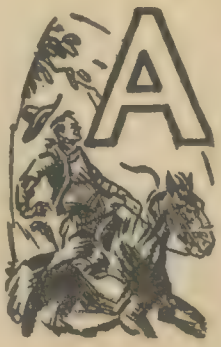
Silent looked him over soberly. "Jist between us," he said, "what would yuh do with the dollar and six-bits?"

"Go away," begged Speedy. "I want to think."

"Well, I'd like to do a little m'self. See yuh later."

## CHAPTER VII

### *Friday's Return*



AS TOMBSTONE went away from that dead steer, he didn't look back, until he was almost a mile away. Riding at top speed over that rough terrain doesn't give much opportunity for a rider to do other than concentrate on his own safety. He finally pulled up and looked around.

Speedy was not in sight, nor was any other human being. He examined the torn elbow in his shirt, and swore quietly. An inch closer and he would have lost one of his bony elbows, along with the chunk of cotton.

He swung his horse to higher ground, watching carefully. After a while he saw the four horses crossing a hog-back, and he was sure he saw Hunk Haverty's pinto. As they reappeared against the skyline again, he could see that two men were on one horse.

"They got Speedy!" he gasped. "Doggone such luck! Kill a blasted steer, and git caught in the act! Well, I've got to keep on— Wait a minute! Uh-huh, uh-huh! Might help, but I don't know."

He swung back, circled in above the dead steer, where he sat in the brush for a long time, watching the spot. Satisfied that no trap had been set for him, he rode down to the steer, quickly took his knife and skinned out the brand, which he examined closely. The expression on his long, lean face was complete disgust. He threw the piece of hide into the brush, and went back to his horse.

"If some half-wit came along and wanted to trade brains," he told his horse, "I'd grab the chance, and pay him, to boot."

Tombstone was stuck. His idea hadn't worked out. If he went back to Wisdom

City, they'd jail him for shooting a steer, and he wouldn't blame them. The evidence showed that Speedy's horse had been killed, Speedy probably injured in the fall. He couldn't ride away and leave Speedy in jail. Tombstone smoked a cigarette and wondered just what move to make next.

"I've got to be smart," he told his horse, "and if that ain't impossible, I'd like to know what is. Well, let's not take root here."

He rode slowly down the hill, bearing south, until he could see a group of ranch buildings, huddled in against the hill. Tombstone had no idea whose ranch it was. In fact, he didn't care much. The enormity of his offense had gradually unfolded. What would Jim Keaton say—his two detectives under arrest for shooting a steer, and no alibi whatever?

He came in behind the ranchhouse, crossed a dry-wash and came in along a corral. There were no horses in the corral, nor was there any sign of life around the place. A nearly-fresh cowhide hung over the corral fence, and the odor was not too sweet. Tombstone sat there and looked the place over. From the ranchhouse gate was a road, heading for Wisdom City.

At least, Tombstone felt that the road would lead to Wisdom City. He was hungry, because they were out too early to get breakfast. Might get something to eat at this place.

He rode up to the back door of the house, swung out of his saddle and walked up to the closed door. He knocked sharply, but there was no reply. He turned the knob and found the door unlocked. Usually there is a pot of coffee on the stove, which only needs heating, and there might be other things to eat.

He walked into the kitchen, but before he could more than look around, a gun was jabbed into his ribs.

"Stay hitched, you blasted fool!" a drawling voice said.

A hand jerked the gun from his holster, and then the man stepped around in front of him.

"Hyah, feller, how about some coffee?" Tombstone said.

The light wasn't too good in the kitchen, but Tombstone saw a bald-headed man, badly in need of a shave, looking at him through rather puffy eyes. He wore a dirty, white shirt, and around his rather corpulent waist was a flour-sack apron, also dirty.

The forty-five in that pudgy hand looked awful big, too. Tombstone laughed, broke off sharply, as he stared past the man, and said:

"Don't hit him, Kid!"

The man whirled, falling for the ages-old trick, but which had been played perfectly. The next moment the pudgy man was going backwards, impelled by a smashing right fist on his fat jaw, and Tombstone had both guns—and a grin. The man brought up sharply against the wall, owl-eyed and panting. Tombstone grinned slowly.

"Mind tellin' me why yuh jumped me?" he asked.

WHERE the man told him to go is not rated as a mild clime.

Tombstone said, "All I wanted was a cup of coffee and I get a six-gun in my ribs. Yuh can't say that's neighborly, my friend."

The man relaxed visibly, as he rubbed his jaw.

"How'd I know yuh only wanted some coffee?" he said huskily. "I thought yuh was tryin' to burgle the place."

Tombstone studied the man's face closely.

"My friend," he said slowly, "you don't lie well. Burgle the house! Why didn't yuh open the door? You had a gun."

The man tightened up, but didn't seem interested in answering Tombstone's question. Tombstone said:

"Whose spread is this, feller?"

"Yuh don't know, eh? Well, find out for yourself."

"Gettin' tough, eh? Does this happen to be the Lazy M?"

"If yuh knew, why ask me? The sooner yuh pull out of here, the better it'll be for yuh."

"Yuh know," remarked Tombstone thoughtfully, "there's the funniest folks in this country. They order yuh out, and they even send yuh letters, care of the sheriff, threatenin' to kill yuh, if yuh don't get out. I can't figure it out."

"Who cares what you figger?" growled the man.

"Well, I dunno. How about makin' me some coffee?"

"I'll make yuh nothin'!"

"Oh, all right, Fatty. I'll leave yore gun on top of a post at the corral. Thanks for yore hospitality, anyway. Yuh're a

mighty fine person to know. *Adios, mofeta.*"

Tombstone led his horse down to the corral, placed the man's gun on a post and started to mount his horse, when he noticed the cowhide again. With the reins in one hand he walked over to the hide and started to turn it over when a rifle bullet almost took his fingers off. It yanked the green hide from his fingers, and he whirled in against his horse.

The man had left the kitchen doorway and stood only a short distance away, with a rifle, and he seemed to be having trouble ejecting the used shell. Tombstone yelled:

"Yuh better drop it, you dry-gulcher!"

At that moment the recalcitrant shell spun out of the chamber, and another clucked in. But before he could get the gun to his shoulder, Tombstone fired. The man jerked back, dropped the rifle, which went off, the bullet striking the hard ground and whining off into the hills, and the man went down, sprawling on his face, his boots still on the porch.

Tombstone went running up there and looked at the man. His face was covered with blood, and he did not move.

"This thing gets more revoltin' every minute," Tombstone said. "What'd he have to take a shot at me for? I was goin' away, peaceful-like. All I done was—oh-oh!"

Tombstone stared back at the corral fence, where the cowhide lay in the dirt. Then he went down there on a dog-trot, picked up the hide and examined it on the raw side. Then he looked back toward the doorway, where the man sprawled.

"Tombstone Jones," he said aloud, "I'm scared to death that yuh're gettin' smart."

Then he ran back to the doorway and went into the house. There was a ramshackle upper story, with a short ladder, which had been set aside.

Quickly he placed the ladder and went up into a sort of garret-like room, where he found Friday Fish, all tied up, gagged and covered with an old blanket. There were no windows, and the place was heavy with dust. Friday stared up at him in wonderment, as Tombstone quickly untied the gag.

Friday had one black eye, a cut lip, and there was a burned spot on the end of his nose. His glasses, one lens cracked, lay on the floor near him. Tombstone cut him loose and helped him up. He was very unstable on his legs, and his voice was barely above a whisper, as he said:

"They beat me up, Tombstone. They burned my nose, trying to force me to tell them. They think now that *you* are a detective."

"They must still believe in fairy tales," said Tombstone. "Can yuh go down that ladder?"

FRIDAY managed to make it, but was shaky. He seemed numbed by what had happened to him, and stopped short on the porch, looking around.

"They blindfolded me," he said. "Where are we?"

"Never mind where-at are we!" exploded Tombstone. "Where-at is it? Friday, I left a dead man right here. Look at the blood on that board! There's his gun—but where is he?"

Friday couldn't know; he just looked dumbly at Tombstone, as they walked down to the corral fence.

"Climb into that saddle, Friday, and I'll ride behind yuh," Tombstone said.

Friday needed assistance, but made it. Tombstone picked up the cowhide, quickly slashed away the brand, gripped it in one hand and climbed up behind Friday, who said, "Tombstone, that smells."

"The whole deal smells," said Tombstone. "Hang on, we're headin' for town."

"They beat me up and burned my nose," complained Friday.

"And you told 'em that me and Speedy are detectives," accused Tombstone.

"No, I did not," denied Friday. "I said you might be."

"Well, that's all right—we might be, kid. Feel all right?"

"I am really a little sick, Tombstone."

"That's all right. I was a little sick when I came here, but I feel pretty good right now."

"Do you have to retain that odoriferous piece of hide?"

"I better. That's all there is between me and a term in jail."

Speedy wasn't having it too easy, either. The sheriff and a number of men stood around outside his bars, trying to get him to tell why they killed Murtin's steer. Shorty Lorimer was the insistent one.

He said, "You fellers came from Broken River, eh? Mebbe-so that's where

my cows have gone, huh? You two came over here to take more of 'em back, eh? Tell the truth, and shame the devil, Smith."

Speedy laughed at him, "Go ahead and blow up yore blood-pressure," he said. "I'm not talkin'. If you want to know things, go find Friday Fish and Tombstone Jones. You won't get anythin' out of me."

"Jones won't come back here," said the sheriff. "He knows better than that, Speedy. He's left yuh in the lurch. It can't hurt yuh none to tell us the truth."

"It'd be unusual," said Silent.

"I'll remember that, feller," assured Speedy calmly.

"I think we better watch for Jones," said Lorimer. "He might come back."

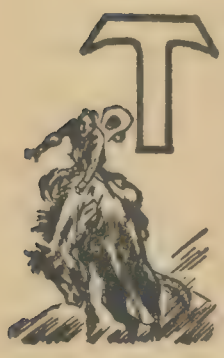
"He'll come back," assured Speedy, "and when he does, somebody might get hurt."

"Threatenin' us, eh?" queried the sheriff.

"I'm in a good spot to do that," Speedy said with a grin.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Mysteries Are Explained*



THE capture of Speedy Smith had caused considerable excitement in town. Wisdom City was filled with folks from the ranches, and there was a lot of speculation over Tombstone Jones, Speedy Smith and Friday Fish. The sheriff was criticized for not making a search for Friday Fish, but his disappearance was overshadowed by the capture of Speedy Smith and the killing of a Lazy L steer, and for no known reason.

Paradise Valley folks liked to talk, speculate and blame, but this was something new to talk about. Silent Sims was talking with Shorty Lorimer in front of the general store, when down the street came Friday Fish. He was not walking very steadily, because of a bad left leg, but he came on to them, a sober expression on his swollen face. They stared at him, but he merely nodded calmly, as he limped past and headed for the Wisdom House.

Silent shoved his hat back and scratched his head in bewilderment.

Shorty said in a husky whisper, "Ain't that Fish—the feller who was missin'?"

"Looks like him," nodded Silent.

Jeff Murtin and Pokey Peterson were coming across from the saloon, but both stopped, staring at the limping figure of Friday Fish. They came on slowly, looking at Silent and Shorty.

"Who was that?" asked Murtin flatly.

"That," replied Silent, "is either Friday Fish or his twin brother, who got beat up. By golly, I better have a talk with that feller. This whole deal has got me twisted. See yuh later, Shorty."

Hunk Haverty was sitting in his office alone, trying to think things out, when he heard the back door of the jail close sharply. The corridor door was open and he heard Speedy Smith say:

"It's about time yuh showed up! Where have you been?"

"Finishin' up the job, Speedy," Tombstone's voice answered. "Friday Fish is loose again, and in good shape. See yuh in a minute."

The sheriff met Tombstone at the doorway, and his six-shooter bored into Tombstone's waist-line.

"I thought you'd have the nerve to come back," said Hunk.

"Why wouldn't I?" asked Tombstone. He tossed the hunk of cowhide to the sheriff, who dodged it and it fell on the floor with a decided *splat*.

"No yuh don't!" snapped the sheriff. "I *sabe* all them tricks."

"Yore brain-joints are looser'n mine!" snorted Tombstone. "Look at that brand, and then look at it from the wrong side."

The sheriff, watching carefully, pulled the piece of hide away with his toe, picked it up and, with one eye on Tombstone, did just what Tombstone ordered.

Hunk Haverty knew brands. He had to know brands to be a sheriff in that country. Slowly his eyes narrowed, as he understood what Tombstone meant. It was all clear now.

"I heard yuh say that Fish is back, Jones," he said quietly.

"I found the poor kid, all tied up and gagged. They beat him up and burned his nose, makin' him tell what he didn't know."

Silent came hurrying in, stopped short, his mouth wide.

"Huh—huh—huh!" grunted the star-

tled deputy. "Hunk, what's goin' on around here? I saw Friday Fish—"

Tombstone walked over and looked outside. Jeff Murtin, Pokey Peterson and another puncher were coming down the street. Tombstone turned his head.

"This looks like it, Hunk—get set!" he said.

Then Tombstone stepped out on the sidewalk. The three men stopped short in their tracks, as though they had struck a brick wall. A rider had dismounted in front of the general store, and was coming down the sidewalk, weaving like a drunk, his face bloody. It was the man who had tried to shoot Tombstone at the ranch. His voice was weak, as he screamed;

"Look out, Hunk! Look out, you fool!" Then he stubbed his toe and fell flat on the sidewalk.

The three men went for their guns, but Tombstone, hunched low, shot first. Murtin stumbled and went to his knees, shooting into the dirt, striking Pokey's left knee and knocking him off-balance. Before he could get his balance, Tombstone shot again, and Pokey went all the way down, when his other leg buckled.

THE third man was shooting wildly, and now he started to run, but Hunk Haverty and Silent went into action, too, and the man went sprawling.

Speedy was yelling for them to let him out, and Silent ran back to unlock the cell door. The street was filling with people. Luckily no one got hit by wild bullets. Murtin was badly hurt, but Pokey only had a broken leg and the other man had absorbed enough lead to keep him quite for a while.

Everyone, except Tombstone, was excited. The sheriff had sent for the doctor, and was trying to tell everybody about it, but getting nowhere.

"Let Jones tell it," suggested Shorty Lorimer.

"There ain't much to tell," said Tombstone. "Them Box M fellers was alterin' the Lazy L and shippin' the cows. Yuh see both outfits brand in the same spot, and it was mighty easy to finish out the Lazy L and make it a box. Yuh see—"

"How did they?" interrupted Shorty. "How could they?"

"With a razor," replied Tombstone. "That Pokey Peterson used to be a barber. I jist remembered how close he cut my hair. Yuh can razor out the rest of the brand and it'll hold long enough to ship and butcher. We figured it out, but we wanted to prove it; so we killed a Box M steer. But, blast the luck, it wasn't an altered brand. The brand I found was a fresh hide at the Box M, where I found Friday Fish, all tied up. Maybe Pokey can tell me more."

Pokey did—and it would have made Tombstone's ancestry turn over in their graves. Friday Fish came wandering out to them, eyeing the casualties. There was an elderly man, using a heavy cane, who moved around, looking things over. Someone called him Judge.

"Well, Friday, I reckon they paid for beatin' you up," remarked Silent.

"It would seem that way, Silent," replied Friday soberly. "Quite a thrilling situation, I'm sure."

Cochise Collins took the man they called Judge by the arm and said, "Judge, here is the young man who asked the question about Henry Van-Jones."

"Ah, yes," smiled the judge. "You were asking about an uncle—a man named Henry Van-Jones."

"Indeed I was, sir," agreed Friday. "Do you—"

"If you would come with me, perhaps I can be of assistance. You see, I have been here over fifty years."

"Don't forget, Friday," called Speedy. "We own what he left."

The men were busy, taking the casualties out of the street.

"I'd shore admire a bite of food," said Tombstone. "How about you, Speedy?"

"I could bite my way through a whole cow. Let's do it."

While they were eating Tombstone, told Speedy what happened at the Box M ranchhouse. Speedy said:

"If that blamed cook had behaved himself, we'd never have rescued Friday."

"We?" queried Tombstone. "You was in jail."

"You didn't even know whose ranch it was."

"Anyway, I was smart enough to figure out that they hair-branded the critters."

"And then killed one that wasn't hair-branded, eh?"

"Oh-oh! Here comes Friday! I wonder what he found out."

"Prob'ly left a million—and he hates to make good his promise. Now, don't give in—make him stick to it."

Friday sat down with them and sighed deeply. Speedy said, "Well?"

Friday shook his head painfully. "Not too well," he said. "The judge remembered something about my uncle, and in an old book he found an entry. He cut it out and gave it to me. Because of our close friendship, I shall let you read—and forget it, I hope."

He handed Speedy the cut-out from a page, and Speedy said;

"Great horn spoon! Why, this is—how old?"

"Forty-seven years old, Speedy. Read it."

"It says, 'Hung for horse-stealin' and shootin' a deputy, Henry Van-Jones, alias Hank Jones, alias Henry Jackson. Jury unanimous. Had no worldly goods, except a rope and a saddle. Insisted on writing his will, which was mailed to a U. R. Fish, Boston. Articles were never claimed.'

"It is signed by Ben Ordway, sheriff," completed Speedy.

"Well, you found Uncle Henry," said Tombstone.

"And what a find," sighed Friday.

HUNK HAVERTY, Shorty Lorimer and Cochise Collins came bustling into the dining room.

Hunk said, "Pokey confessed that Jeff shot Oren Miller. Everythin' is cleared up now."

"This telegram just came for you," said Cochise. "Might be important, yuh know."

Speedy opened it and read it aloud. Jim Keaton had wired;

WOULD ADVISE YOU DROP CASE AND COME HOME AT ONCE. LORIMER SAYS NO DETECTIVE HAS BEEN ON CASE. WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?

Lorimer said, "You don't mean to tell me—aw, that's ridiculous!"

"Wait a minute!" snorted Hunk Haverty. "Do you mean to say—"

"Yuh know what I'd like to do, Speedy?" asked Tombstone soberly.

"What?" asked Speedy flatly, his mouth full of food.

"I'd like to find a place where brains are appreciated."

"We might ask Jim Keaton to write it all out for 'em," suggested Speedy.

"Write it out? No, no! Jist tell him to draw some pitchers—they won't understand writin'."

"Go ahead." Shorty Lorimer was grinning. "Rub it in, boys. When yuh run out of words, come out to the Lazy L and pick out the two best saddle-horses on the ranch. That's how much I believe yuh're detectives. You shore fooled me."

"Fooled me too," added Friday Fish.

"As far as that goes," said Speedy, "we fool everybody—includin' me and Tombstone Jones."

THE ROLLICKING RANGE SLEUTHS USE GUN MEDICINE TO STOP AN EPIDEMIC OF RUSTLING IN

# SECURITY IN SILVER RIVER

Another Complete Tombstone and Speedy Novelet

## By W. C. TUTTLE

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

# Too Smart for KILLING

## By JACKSON COLE

*The three survivors of Bull Lawson's gang held the loot—but somebody betrayed them!*

THEY rode slowly through the night, heading for the hideout back in the hills—three men who hated each other and trusted no one.

"Somebody in the gang must have tipped off the bank," Ed Small said for the third time in the last half hour. "The folks in town were ready and waiting when we staged that hold-up. Mighty strange!"

"Yuh said that before, Ed." There was disgust in "Bull" Lawson's deep voice. "I'm gettin' tired of hearin' it. Couldn't them folks in Rocky Ridge have learned about it some other way. Did it have to be one of the gang?"

"Seven of us rode into that town," John Vance said in gloomy tones. "And now just the three of us left. They shore shoot straight in Rocky Ridge."

"Yeah," muttered Small. "Somebody warned them."

Ever since it had happened Ed Small had been clinging to that idea, working it over like a dog gnawing at a bone. Vance had started wondering why. The wiry little rat-faced man was leading up to something—but what?

With his square face and the clothing of a professional gambler John Vance seemed out of place riding with these two men. He looked as if he should be at a gambling table dealing the cards with deft fingers. As for big, hard-faced

Lawson threw the little man out of the saddle

"Bull" Lawson, he was a typical outlaw leader—fast with a gun, and always dangerous.

Small named over the death list. "Windy, Thorp, Harry and the Kid," he said. "All of them blasted out of their saddles before we got out of that town."

"It could have been worse," Lawson said. "We got the money from the bank, didn't we? Three bags of it. Stop beefing, Ed."

Vance said nothing. They rode on. The trees were black shapes reaching toward the dim stars, the faint trail was a thin silk ribbon spread on the ground ahead of the horses. The bags contain-

ing the money from the bank holdup were tied to Lawson's saddle. They bumped softly against the leather.

In a casual way Small had been edging his horse close to the pinto Lawson was riding. Now suddenly his hand moved and his gun flashed in the moonlight.

"I've had enough," Small said, pointing the six-shooter at Lawson. "Hand over them money bags, Bull."

Small had made the mistake of getting too close. Lawson caught the wrist that held the gun and gave a yank that threw the little man out of the saddle. Small's gun roared, the bullet tearing harmlessly into the ground. At a short distance from the two men, John Vance calmly watched and waited.

ED SMALL hit the ground hard and sprawled there motionless. His horse shied away among the bushes and vanished in the shadows. Bull Lawson jerked out his gun, leveled it at Small, then hesitated.

"Heard something snap when he hit the ground," Lawson said. "Reckon I busted his neck. No use wastin' a bullet; only got three left in my belt. Come on, Johnny."

The outlaw leader backed his horse away, wheeled, then headed off along the trail again, at a brisk pace, with Vance following close on his heels. Behind them they left Small, sprawled out upon the ground, motionless.

Neither of them spoke again until they reached the old deserted line shack which had been serving the gang as hideout and headquarters for the last six months. They stopped near the shack, placed the bags of gold upon the ground, unsaddled the horses, turned them into the corral, and entered the shack, carrying the loot.

"Light the candle, Johnny," said Lawson.

In the dimness Vance found the rough table, placed the bags he carried upon it, struck a match which he held to the stub of a candle which was stuck in the neck of an empty whisky bottle. The flickering yellow glow revealed the bleak interior of the cabin, which was bare except for a few chairs, a stove and a tier of bunks in one corner.

Lawson dropped the other bag of gold upon the table, seated himself in a chair and motioned for Johnny to sit down in another chair across the table from him. He nodded at the bags.

"Made a good haul this time," the outlaw leader said. "Havin' a gambler like you workin' with us turned out to be right handy. Yuh could drift into a new town and size up things without folks suspectin'. It was a good deal."

He grinned at Johnny Vance. But Johnny did not respond. He eyed the bandit leader coldly. "Yeah," he said. "And since I joined the gang six months ago, I sized up three other banks for you—soft touches—and you turned thumbs down on 'em, Bull. Six months wasted. Mebbe Ed Small wasn't the only one in the gang who was suspicious."

Lawson guffawed. "Can't blame me for that, Johnny. Jest makin' sure of yuh."

Vance eyes narrowed. "And this time we ran into trouble. Mebbe Small was right. Mebbe someone tipped off the bank in Rocky Ridge. I was in town two days ago, Bull. I could have done it."

Lawson nodded. "I know. I been think' about that, Johnny. But if it was so, you wouldn't be tellin' me about it now, 'cause yuh're smart. You savvy. I'd kill yuh quick as a flash. Yep, yuh're too smart for killin', Johnny."

Vance's eyes glinted. "Me bein' alive is just luck," he snapped. "Plenty of fellers died—Windy, Thorpe, Harry, the Kid—and Ed Small—with a broken neck." He edged forward in his chair, his hand dropping close to the butt of his holstered gun. "Only me and you left, Bull. Ever thought of that?"

Lawson's grin stiffened. "But this holdup was a success." He relaxed and jovially slapped the money bags. "Plenty of loot—plenty of swag. Forget about what Ed Small said. You ain't no traitor, Johnny. I ain't forgettin' that yuh helped to rob the bank and took the gunfire like the rest of us. Yuh wouldn't never have risked yore life like that if yuh'd been a traitor."

"But it might have been a trap set to catch the entire gang, a trap which didn't work out as planned," Vance retorted.

For a moment a chill ran down Lawson's spine. His hand moved toward his weapon. Then, just in time, he noticed that Vance was all set to make a quick draw—and he hesitated. At this crucial moment Lawson's fingers happened to brush one of the money bags and his thoughts were diverted. All along, his real thoughts had been centered upon

the swag which had been stolen from the bank. He postponed his vague suspicions, determined to settle them at a later time.

"Let's don't have a ruckus," he said. "Got somethin' better to do, findin' out how much money we picked up. We'll divide it. Of course, the biggest share goes to me, 'cause I'm the leader."

Vance said nothing as Lawson drew a hunting knife and cut the string at the neck of one of the money bags. The bag was filled with gold coins.

"I'll take this one," Vance said, grabbing the bag with his left hand, while his right darted to the hideaway gun in a shoulder holster beneath his coat. "We needn't count it."

"No you don't!" Lawson roared, driving the knife into the bag and pinning it to the table. Then with his left hand he reached for his gun. "I don't like this, Johnny!"

VANCE'S draw was faster. He had Lawson covered before the outlaw leader could get his Colt out of the holster.

Lawson released his grip on the knife and drew his left hand away from the butt of his six-shooter.

"Looks like I got you both now," said Ed Small's voice from the open door behind Vance. "Drop that gun, Vance."

Vance glanced around and saw the little outlaw standing in the doorway covering them both with his gun. Abruptly Vance flung a bag of gold at Small. The heavy bag struck the outlaw, causing him to stagger back and drop the gun.

Lawson's six-shooter flashed up. Vance ducked as it roared. The bullet plowed into Small's right shoulder. He dropped, too badly wounded to be dangerous. Before Lawson could shoot again, Vance put a slug in the outlaw leader's left arm.

"Reckon that finishes it," Vance said.

Vance opened his coat and revealed a U.S. Marshal's badge pinned to his suspenders. "It's been my job to get you and your gang, Lawson. For that reason I posed as an escaped convict six months ago, managed to win your confidence and join the gang. Those reward notices and the newspaper clipping prison crash-out were forged. Also those bank tip-offs I gave you—if you'd have followed them we probably would have nabbed you within two weeks."

He paused and smiled at the bandit who cursed him fluently.

"But it wasn't until you agreed to rob the bank at Rocky Ridge that I got a chance to warn folks and set a trap," Vance went on. "And if the sheriff there hadn't lost his nerve and failed me, there would have been no actual robbery, no shooting, and you and the rest of the gang—including the ones now dead—would have been safely behind bars hours ago. However—better late than never!"

Lawson scowled at him. "I should have figgered it, Johnny," he growled. "You're jest too smart to be an outlaw and a killer!"

NEXT ISSUE

## YOU DUG YOUR GRAVE, RANGER

A Smashing, Complete Navajo Raine Novelet by JACKSON COLE

# The Quick and the Dead

a novelet by

ALLAN K. ECHOLS

"That's all, Pierce," Goodspeed yelled. "Drop that gun!"

*Jim Goodspeed had to brave fire and lead before he could reach his own paradise!*

## CHAPTER I

### *Hostility in Paradise*

JIM GOODSPEED began to feel the resentment of Paradise the moment he rode into the livery stable and dismounted.

The stablekeeper, an old man with a home-whittled peg leg, studied his face a long moment, seemed to recognize him. He used a kind of aggressive indiffer-

ence, sitting on a horseshoe keg in the livery entrance and not getting up when Goodspeed asked for feed for his animal.

"I'll have him took care of before you're ready to head for the ranch," the man shrugged when Goodspeed stood before him.

"I want him fed and curried," Goodspeed repeated. "And what ranch have you decided I'll be heading for?" He had half-expected this kind of treatment, from what the lawyer back in Woodbine had told him, and he wanted to get it out on the surface as quickly as possible.

"Your own. You're Goodspeed, ain't you? Come to steal anything your dead uncle might of overlooked before he got his deservin's. We heard you was coming. Well, I'll feed your hoss for you, but I ain't rubbin' him down. I ain't no servant to no Goodspeed, much less his hoss!"

Goodspeed's hand reached out to jerk the man off his seat, then his fist clenched as he remembered that the man was crippled.

"Go on and talk some more," he said softly. "It's kind of new to me, people making charges like that against me. What's sticking in your craw, old man?"

"Nothin' is sticking in my craw," the old man answered belligerently. "If that uncle o' your'n had of robbed *me*, he wouldn't have lived as long as he did. I'm just lettin' you know how you stand in my estimation. Bring your hoss in whenever you want to buy him a meal, but don't expect me to nurse him. That's all!" He shook his head to express his disgust. "Me curry a Goodspeed hoss! Ain't that somethin'!"

"I take it you don't like the name of Goodspeed?"

"Who does?" the old man snorted. "Except maybe a Goodspeed?"

His own suspicions that his inheritance included a bad name as well as a substantial fortune were beginning to grow into a conviction now. Jim got a grip on his anger and thought this over. He did not like being the object of such hatred, but he could understand the other man's point of view.

While he was adjusting himself to having to face the antagonism of this town, he turned back to his horse and untied his war bag and his blankets. He opened the bag and took out the tin lock-box containing his late uncle's papers, which he had obtained from the lawyer, retied the bag and threw it into a corner. He unsaddled his horse, led it to a stall and rubbed it down.

When he had finished, he took the lock-box and started out of the stable. As he approached the big front doors he saw a girl standing with the old man, and the antagonistic, searching look she gave him made him stop.

"That's him," the old man said. "Just rode in."

The girl's worn skirt and blouse were neat but they had seen better days. But there was a pride in her carriage and a beauty about her that came from the depths of character rather than from a pretty face. Dignity, self-confidence—those were the words that flashed through Goodspeed's mind as he looked at her. And anger, too, he noted regretfully, anger centered on him.

The girl spoke first. "You're Mr. Goodspeed?"

"Jim Goodspeed, ma'am." He framed a friendly smile.

The girl did not respond to the smile. "You're the new owner of the Paradise Cattle Company?"

"So I'm told."

"Then you're going to be told something else. You're a bunch of thieves and murderers! The Paradise outfit may have whipped my father and the rest of the farmers here, but I'm back home now, and you're not going to whip me. I'm giving you fair warning that I'm going to get the Circle B back no matter what it takes!"

GOODSPEED felt his cheeks burning. "I didn't whip your father, ma'am—and I haven't got any plans for whipping you that I know of. And if I happen to have anything that belongs to you, you can sure have it back with my best wishes."

The old man sitting on the keg said, "Believe that one and he'll tell you another."

Goodspeed snapped, "How about you either keeping your remarks to yourself, or else opening up and telling me what you're talking about? I happen to be a stranger around here, and I don't understand all this." He turned to the girl. "Now just what has Paradise stolen from you or your father?"

The anger in the girl's face changed to speculation for a moment as she studied him suspiciously. Then she said:

"You've just come here. Maybe you don't know the facts yet. Paradise Cattle Company stole my father's ranch, the Circle B. They've got it fenced and they're running cattle on it now, just as if it was theirs."

Goodspeed came to a sudden decision as he saw here a chance to prove perhaps the fact that he did not come here with the intention of preying on his neighbors.

"Look, Miss, I didn't get your name. But if Paradise is running cattle on your land I'll know it pretty soon. And in the meantime, just turn them out. That's all there is to it. If you own the land, it's yours and you've got a right to keep our stock off of it."

"It's not that simple," the girl snapped. "Paradise stole the title to it. It's theirs legally until I can prove that the title was obtained crookedly."

"How could anybody make anybody sign away his land if he didn't want to?" Goodspeed asked suspiciously. "If your father didn't want to sell, then he didn't have to."

"That's just it. Paradise destroyed him, crippled him and broke him, and then forced him to sell to get money enough to feed his family. Maybe you think that's legal, but I believe I can prove in court that it wasn't. Five hundred dollars for a thousand acres, stock and improvements! What could be honest about a deal like that?"

Goodspeed tapped the tin box under his arm. "Look, Miss. If Paradise made a deal like that with your father, the deed will be in this box. And if that's right, you can have your ranch back for the same price as quick as I can transfer the ownership. We'll just step into the office here and go through these papers and settle it."

The girl looked suspicious, but followed him into the livery office where he sat down at an old pine desk and opened the box, laying out eight or ten thick abstracts.

"I didn't get your name," he said.

The girl had seated herself on an old backless chair and, still distrustful, she said:

"Sally Blaine. My father's name is Jeptha Blaine, and our land was in Sections eighteen, nineteen and twenty, nine hundred and sixty acres, to be exact."

Jim Goodspeed looked at the names on the folded abstracts. "Not any of these," he said, and then started examining single folded papers. "Here it is," he added, reading through one of them. "Here's a quit-claim deed. Yes, the consideration is five hundred dollars. But there's no abstract—"

"No," the girl said. "I had that, and I refused to give it up. All I have to do is to prove that the quit-claim deed was signed under torture—"

"You don't have to prove a thing," Jim Goodspeed said, getting to his feet. "Here's your deed, and if the transfer has been registered at the courthouse in Woodbine, believe me I'll have it transferred back. Is that satisfactory?"

The girl took the deed, and as she examined it Goodspeed could see that she still was not convinced. The old liveryman, who had followed them into the office, helped that along by saying:

"I'd believe that when I saw it, Sally."

Goodspeed said, "You talk too much, you old walrus! Now go feed my horse."

GOODSPEED picked up the box of documents and went out the door, leaving the girl standing reading the paper. As he walked down the street he knew for certain now that he was in a strange and hostile town. He was seeing that he had inherited more from his uncle than his fortune.

He had inherited the hatred of his uncle's neighbors.

It seemed to Goodspeed as he walked down the street that this little cowtown nestling at the floor of Pine Ridge was well named Paradise. Riding in from the County Seat, he had passed half a dozen wealthy-looking ranch establishments. And according to the lawyer back in Woodbine, most of them now belonged to him.

The only imperfection in the picture was the group of rundown nester farms clinging to the banks of Pecan Creek, which came down out of tree-covered Pine Ridge and twisted off across the carpet of native prairie grass.

Goodspeed had seen this incongruity and had remembered some of the conversation of his uncle's lawyer back in Woodbine yesterday, and had begun even then to experience a feeling of unease about this squatters' settlement.

"You own fully one-half of that whole fifty thousand acres which lies between the Pine Ridge and the Sandstone Mountains; also, a business block in town," the

lawyer had said. "Except for what Paradise Cattle Company has under fence and for the farming settlement on the creek, the rest of the land is open range and not worth much on account of lack of water."

"I understand his holdings were incorporated," Goodspeed said. "Paradise Cattle Company—does that mean there are other partners?"

The lawyer was a precise, dry little man. He took off his glasses and tapped his desk with them while he gazed out the window and formed his words carefully.

"I have been his attorney, and am the administrator of the estate. I have hopes of serving you in the same capacity. So, it might be better for me to speak frankly than to adhere strictly to the formalities."

"It might help if you was to say what's on your mind," Goodspeed admitted. He had been puzzled, and not well impressed with the little attorney.

"As a legal corporation, there of course had to be at least two other stockholders in your uncle's company. One of them is the ranch foreman, a man they call Sugar Dane. The other is the town marshal of Paradise, a man by the name of Ira Pierce.

"Each holds a share in his name to fulfill legal requirements, but it is kept mortgaged to your uncle. Your uncle had just lent them those shares for two reasons, the first, as I said, to comply with the laws of incorporation. The second reason is one which concerns you more.

"I must tell you that your uncle was an ambitious man. He had many enemies who would stop his expansion. His foreman, Dane, and his man Pierce, whom he kept in the marshal's office, were the instruments of his expansion, if you understand me. Their dividends were based on their individual usefulness instead of the earnings of the company."

"You mean, that whatever my uncle wanted Dane got for him and Pierce made it look legal? And they were paid accordingly?"

The lawyer's face broke into a frosty smile. "Well, that's a somewhat blunt way of putting it, but you must understand that this is a new and raw country where laws are not too well defined or enforced." He surveyed Goodspeed's tall, flat frame, his wide shoulders, and the guns swinging from his hips, and offered:

"But you give me the impression that you can very well carry on where he left off. It is a tragedy that that crazy farmer shot him in the back."

Goodspeed had got to his feet. "Offhand, it strikes me that that's about the only way any little man might have got a chance to settle a grievance with my departed uncle."

The lawyer shrugged. "I wouldn't know about that. I feel confident, however, that you will be able to take care of yourself. And if I can serve you . . ."

## CHAPTER II

### *Sugar Dane*

THAT had been part of yesterday's conversation while the necessary formalities had been gone through. It had told Goodspeed that he had inherited two men who were nominally his partners, but who, he suspected, were simply crooked hirelings of his land-hog uncle.

He wanted to see those gentlemen.

He had learned that he also owned what the lawyer had called a "business block." He wanted to see what that was like, too. He walked down the street to find his business.

Before he had got very far he came to a small restaurant and turned in to get some dinner. As he sat down at one of the tables an energetic young man took his order for steak. "How'd you like it, sir? Rare, well done, or medium?"

"Better make it well done," Goodspeed grinned. "I've had it rare enough in my day." He liked the neatness and service in the place, and the personality of the young man.

Looking out the window, Goodspeed saw Sally Blaine walking past, and a few moments later saw the old liveryman hobbling up the street. The old man stopped to talk to somebody, then went on and talked to somebody else.

Goodspeed smiled a tight smile to himself. "Old gossip," he thought. "Can't wait to spread the news."

The young man returned to his table, bringing hot, feathery biscuits and butter and the steak. Goodspeed liked this man and the place.

"Nice place you've got," he commented. "Pretty country, too."

The young man smiled. "Could be better," he said. "Not enough business to keep me and my wife both busy. Country looks good, but it's a one-man show. That's never good for business."

"I see," Goodspeed agreed. "Paradise Cattle Company owns a business here in town, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. The Trading Company. More of the one-man show. I wish I could sell out and get into a more lively business."

Goodspeed finished his meal and went out onto the street, and a man stopped him just outside the restaurant.

Although Goodspeed was above six feet in his boots, the man towered above him by a good two inches and outweighed him by a good forty pounds. He had a beefy body, tied-down guns, and a coarse face on which there was now a smile as he offered his hand.

"Jim Goodspeed? I'm Sugar Dane, Paradise Cattle foreman. Heard you was here and was looking for you. Sure glad to see you, pardner."

Goodspeed studied the man with a quick glance, and he did not like him. He did not take the proffered hand, but nodded his head and merely said, "Howdy."

The man dropped his hand and continued, apparently not noticing the slight. "We been expecting you. I wanted to see you as quick as I could to kind of let you know how things stood. I'm sorta ramrod of the P. C. outfit and your uncle kind of left the business in my hands. I know how everything stacks up. I hear you already bumped into one of the things we're always up against."

"News gets around, don't it?" Goodspeed observed softly. "Well, did I handle it like old Craig Goodspeed would have done?"

"Sugar" Dane twisted his face in puzzlement. "I couldn't exactly figger out your idea. We had a tough time runnin' old Blaine off'n that land and gettin' that deed. Old Peg is telling it around that you hauled off and plumb give the Blaine girl back the land. What's behind it?"

"It must have taken considerable persuasion to chase the old man, the way I heard it," Goodspeed said questioningly.

Sugar Dane smiled a crooked smile. "It did, at that. I had to run cattle over his crops two seasons, and then get him cornered and use a little personal persuasion on him to make him sign that quit-claim deed." Dane's eyes narrowed. "Oh, I get it. We didn't get the abstract, and you're throwin' the quit-claim deed back in her lap to stop her suin' on that, and then go after a warranty deed and the abstract, huh? That'd clear the title complete."

"No, that wasn't the idea," Goodspeed said evenly.

"Then what?"

"What would you say the Blaine land was worth?" Goodspeed countered.

"Some of the best bottomland grass we've got. I'd say ten dollars an acre, say ten thousand for the land and improvements."

"And Paradise gave her father five hundred. We're not doing that kind of business, Dane. That's why I told the girl she'd get her land back."

SUGAR DANE looked at Goodspeed in frank astonishment, searching for a moment as he took the measure of his chances with Goodspeed.

Then he said, "I'm a pardner in that ranch, and I done a whole lot of work to get that land. You can't throw it away like that at the first sight of a pretty face, you blasted fool—"

Jim Goodspeed had his tin box under his left arm, but he cocked his right fist and sent it with a lightning swift upward slash that cracked squarely on Sugar Dane's jaw and sent him backward off the wooden walk into the dust of the gutter.

Sugar Dane rolled over without stopping, got to his knees, picked up one of his guns which had fallen out of its holster, and lifted it. As his eyes went to Goodspeed, he looked down the barrel of Goodspeed's weapon.

"Don't try it, Dane! And while we're getting acquainted, you'd better learn that I'll be running the business and making my own decisions from here on. I said I was turning that land back to Blaine, and I am! Do you still object?"

Sugar Dane got to his feet, dropped his gun into its pouch and brushed some of the dust off his clothes. When he looked at Goodspeed again he was licking his lips and his eyes were narrow and ugly.

"We ain't got well acquainted yet," he said. "If I was you, I wouldn't be in too big a hurry to start running things. There's others got an interest in the

P. C. brand."

With that he turned and headed down toward the saloon.

The fight over, the crowd which had collected cast vague, noncommittal glances at Jim Goodspeed. He was not in the practice of explaining himself, but on this occasion he said to the group in general:

"If anybody has any complaints against the P. C. brand, all he has to do is to come to me and explain things. If he's right, he'll be able to get things straightened out to his satisfaction."

There was no answer from any of the cold-faced men, and the crowd melted by twos and threes. Goodspeed knew that they were discussing him, but disbelieving his announcement.

He had not won them over.

Goodspeed made directly for the Trading Company, owned by Paradise Cattle. It was a sprawling general store of two stories, with a company office and bedrooms upstairs. Jim Goodspeed walked through aisles of general merchandise and came to the rear corner where there was a small partitioned-off section used as an office.

Goodspeed waited while the manager talked to a group of four farmers, and he could not help but overhear the conversation. The manager was a sour-faced individual with a scarecrow body in a flapping suit of rusty black. Right now he was raising his voice to a squeak.

"I've told you before and I'm telling you again—you squatters don't get no credit here! You ain't got a chance of ever paying, and we ain't in business for charity—"

One of the farmers interrupted angrily. "We're not asking for charity. The Company's cattle have overrun our vegetable gardens and destroyed them as well as our field crops. Company riders have shot our pigs—"

"You shouldn't let your pigs run out," the manager snapped.

One of the more level-headed of the farmers tried to quiet things by speaking in a conciliatory tone. "Mr. Hemmingway, you know that our crops were overrun last year and that we didn't have enough stock feed to carry penned-up hogs. They'd all have starved if they couldn't have got to the creek to rustle acorns."

"Then you should have fenced a hog pasture."

"You know we can't afford hog wire when we can't even buy barbed wire. We're not asking for charity, as you say, but our families are hungry. Our women and children have to eat until we can raise something—"

"I've told you the answer," Hemmingway said icily. "I'm sorry for your folks, but business is business."

ONE OF the farmers spoke sharply. "You'd better think again, mister. We're not going to let our wives and kids starve. There's ways—"

"Don't you threaten me!" Hemmingway shouted. "I'll have the law wipe out the whole nest of you crooks if you get any ideas like overrunning this store. If you had any sense, you'd load up your wagons and find some other place to live, anyway."

Goodspeed, with anger welling up in him, stepped over to the railing. He reached out his long arm, his fingers caught Hemmingway's shirt front and he jerked the surprised man to his feet.

"You the manager of this store?"

"Yes," Hemmingway screeched, "and take your hands off me. I'll call the marshal."

"Later," Goodspeed answered. "But right now you've got other business. I'm Goodspeed. I believe this store is my property."

The man's eyes widened, and Goodspeed also heard some kind of sound from the farmers behind him. "Oh, Mr. Goodspeed," Hemmingway piped.

"That's right. These men were asking for credit. Well, give it to them."

"But they can't pay. They never will be able to pay—"

Goodspeed's voice was sharp and impatient. "Never mind that. They're hungry. Get busy! Load up a wagon—"

One of the farmers spoke angrily. "We're not asking charity from you." It was apparent that he had instantly bridled at the name of Goodspeed. "We were just asking for business credit. We hope—"

"I know," Goodspeed answered. "I'm not trying to give you charity. I've never run a store before, but I'm running this one now. And my theory is that to do business you've got to do it with friends. Credit is an important part of business, and from what you say, this is an emergency. We can thresh out the details later."

## CHAPTER III

*Some Changes Are Made*

GOODSPEED turned back to Hemmingway who was standing with his thin lips pursed.

"Get your pad out and take down these men's orders. Call a couple of your clerks and start them loading these gentlemen's wagons. Give 'em all the food and anything else they'll need to see them through."

Hemmingway drew his wasted figure up and assumed an air of injured dignity.

"Mr. Goodspeed," he said, enunciating his words slowly and distinctly, "your uncle was satisfied with the way I conducted this business, and he did not interfere but backed me up. So, if my management is not satisfactory to you, I must submit my resig—"

Goodspeed interrupted him. "Fine! It's too late for you to resign. Get your hat and get out. In a couple of days come back and I'll settle up with you."

Goodspeed lifted his long legs over the low office railing, stepped inside, laid down the lock-box. Picking up a pad of order blanks, he said to the farmers: "Now, if you gents will just give me your names and the lists of the things you want, we'll get them into your wagons as fast as the boys can load them in."

One of the farmers stepped up to the railing. "That's mighty kind of you, whatever your idea is. But for my part I don't intend to sign no notes nor nothing. That's just the first step to Paradise takin' away even the little stuff we got left. We ain't got any cause to like your outfit, mister."

Goodspeed saw that the other three farmers were of the same mind. They were suspicious of him, and unfriendly, but they had hungry families.

"No notes," he said. "Open account. If and when you can pay your bills. If you can't—well, that's the risk a business house takes, and we're ready to take it. Now what do you need to see you through?"

A feeling of sadness went through Jim Goodspeed as he watched those men. Half-reluctantly because of their pride and of their hatred of the Paradise Cattle Company, and yet eager to grasp this chance to get food to their families, these men stepped up and gave their names and their orders. Some of them had lists written out on little slips of paper.

Goodspeed called a couple of clerks and started them loading out the farmers' goods, rolling bags of flour, sides of meat, and other goods out to the rear loading dock. He saw the open safe, placed his box of deeds in it and closed the door. Then he saw the young restaurant man at the front counter making purchases, and called to him.

"I got a mighty good meal and mighty good service in your eating place a while ago," he said, "but I didn't get your name."

"John Smith," the young man smiled.

"Well, John, I'm Jim Goodspeed. I own this store and I own Paradise Cattle Company. Neither seems to have been very popular around here, and I kind of inherited that unpopularity. I'm changing things here, and I believe I've got a place you can fit in."

The young man's face had sobered when he learned who Goodspeed was, and now he said, "To tell you the truth, I've got my own business, and I don't believe I could be of much help to you. Thanks just the same."

Goodspeed said, "I know how you feel. Nobody believes that I'm trying to undo some of the damage my uncle has done."

"I didn't say that—"

"I know—you don't want to touch anything with a Goodspeed tag on it, either. You forgot you told me a while ago that you didn't have enough business to keep you and your wife both busy. All right, here's your chance: I need a manager for this store. Take the job on your own terms. Then, if you like the business, I'll sell you the store and let you pay for it out of your earnings. Your wife can run the restaurant. What can you lose?"

John Smith was a man of decision, and he quickly saw what he was facing.

"One thing," he said. "You're gambling that I'll do what you want done. I'm telling you, I'll run it fair to everybody or I won't run it. On that basis, I'll give it a try."

"Step into your office, John," Goodspeed said, and offered his hand to seal the bargain. "You've got yourself a business."

And that was as much of a contract as there ever was needed between them.

John Smith looked up as the front door opened. He said, "I'm satisfied, but here comes a man who might not be. That's Ira Pierce, the town marshal, and he holds some kind of an interest in Paradise. He's the Bull of the Woods around town with Craig Goodspeed gone, and he might not like to step down off his throne. He's got a fist and a trigger and a mind, and he's good with all of them."

GOODSPEED watched the marshal coming down the aisle between the bags and stacked cans of merchandise, and this period during Pierce's approach gave Goodspeed a moment to size the man up. He did not like what he saw.

Ira Pierce was considerable of a man. He was fully as tall as Goodspeed, and well filled out, yet his stride was easy and his muscles lithe under his tight-fitting tan shirt. A pearl-handled six-gun was tied down to his right thigh, and he wore fancy-stitched boots and a light Stetson. His stride suggested his sense of his own importance and his confidence in his ability to maintain that position.

This man, Goodspeed judged, was more dangerous than Sugar Dane. Although Pierce appeared in a light, friendly mood, Goodspeed saw that behind this the man was sizing him up, measuring strength with him.

His uncle, Goodspeed thought, must have been an exceptionally strong man to have kept under control two such men as Dane and Pierce, for neither of the pair was the kind that would have respected or obeyed anybody of less power than themselves.

And Jim Goodspeed had no illusions about it—they would take over from him if they could. That was why they had come to look him over, to judge their chances of taking Paradise away from him.

Pierce was a handsome man, and he had a fine, white-toothed smile now as he offered his hand to Goodspeed. "Heard you'd got here. Glad to meet you, Goodspeed."

Despite his smiling welcome, Pierce's eyes were searching Goodspeed down to the last detail, judging his strength, his weaknesses.

Goodspeed knew this. Too much of what he had heard and seen had built up in him a righteous anger, and he was no hand to keep this hidden. He merely nodded to Pierce and said, "Howdy."

Pierce's eyes wandered around the store while he adjusted to this state of affairs, and then he said, "You know, there's three of us together in the Company. Your uncle ran it, of course, but he left it up to me and Dane to take care of the details. Things were going along fine until he was drygulched, and there ain't any use in disturbing them. Dane and me have a right to pass on any step taken. I hear that you've already taken a couple of bad steps."

"The Blaine ranch and this store?" Goodspeed asked evenly.

"Yes. We've all got an interest in this business. You shouldn't have done those things without us approving." Pierce still carried his smile, but there was a tone of authority in his voice.

"You've got that wrong," Goodspeed answered with equal smoothness. "Each of you holds, subject to mortgage, one of the hundred shares of no par value. That is to comply with the laws relating to corporations. You didn't draw dividends on those shares, and you will not draw them. You were paid money for other services to Paradise, such as chasing people off land my uncle happened to want. Legally, I own ninety-eight percent of the stock and thus the majority of votes, and I am therefore the boss. And from now on, Paradise Ranch will not need either of you. That is the end of the matter."

Pierce's smile never left his face. "You may be taking a wrong step," he said. "Even if you have fired me, I'm still marshal of this town. I still own a share in that ranch, and I don't let myself get brushed aside that easy, friend."

Goodspeed read in the man's face that he had decided to show his weight. It was the first showdown of strength between them, and Pierce was smilingly sure of himself.

"While you're getting used to the idea of how things are," Pierce went on, "there's another matter we can settle. You drew a gun on Dane a while ago, and that's an offense against the town laws. I'm going to have to ask you to let me disarm you and take you down to the jail until that matter is straightened out."

This was it; this was the test. If Jim

Goodspeed submitted to such a raw deal, he was done—finished. Pierce would be boss of everything, and Goodspeed would be lucky to get out with his life. It was ridiculous, but it was deadly, for there was great and lethal strength in Ira Pierce.

"I said to raise your hands," Pierce repeated quietly. His own hand dropped to his weapon and brought it out swiftly.

Jim Goodspeed had read this move in Pierce's face and had dived when he recognized it. As Pierce's hand came bearing his gun upward, Goodspeed's hands caught it with both of his own, one with a viselike grip on his wrist, the other on the gun barrel. And with the same movement he tore the gun upward and out of Pierce's grasp.

"Let's do it this way," he said, and turning handed the gun to John Smith, together with his own. "Now, Pierce, let's have a sample of what you're so proud of."

## CHAPTER IV

### *Jim Makes Another Enemy*

GOODSPEED needn't have invited Pierce, for the man was already in action. His fist caught Goodspeed in the jaw before he had time to know that the fight was on. The blow knocked Goodspeed back against a stack of syrup buckets, which rolled in all directions.

As he got up, Pierce advanced on him, the civilized smile gone from his face, wiped away by a brutally vicious display of love of fighting for its own sake.

And then they stood toe to toe and slugged it out. Goodspeed put everything he had behind his blows, but they seemed to bounce off Pierce's solid body without damage. He was fighting a superb animal who had tasted blood and who was insensitive to pain. Sometimes the very weight of Goodspeed's blows drove the man back against a counter and toppled it over, sometimes Pierce's slugging fists drove Goodspeed back, for there was immense strength in Pierce.

Pierce's blows hurt, but Goodspeed kept reminding himself that this was not just another fight; it was a fight for possession of Paradise. He *had* to win.

Pierce was still breathing easy, and he knocked Goodspeed back against the counter and then rushed him. Goodspeed recovered himself quick enough and sent a ripping blow to Pierce's chin which sent the man tumbling over backward into a crate of eggs.

As Pierce got to his feet, dripping mashed eggs, Goodspeed was ready for him and knocked him down again. He got up the third time and Goodspeed cracked him again, and he went down hard.

He lay on his back a moment, then got to his hands and knees and hastily crawled under a table of canned tomatoes, got to his feet overturning the table as he arose, and stamped toward the front door, pushing the gathered clerks and customers aside. At the door he kicked it open and disappeared onto the street.

John Smith watched him disappear, then turned back to Goodspeed. "There," he said with a trace of amazement in his voice, "goes the maddest man I ever saw in my life."

Goodspeed was rubbing his bruised fist. "He didn't act exactly happy," he said.

"And he's not whipped," Smith said. "That kind don't take a whipping easy."

"No, he's not whipped," Goodspeed admitted. "He's just smart enough not to waste any more time on a battle he can't win. He'll come back with something else."

John Smith handed Goodspeed back his weapon. "You'd better be ready for him when he comes," he suggested. "I'll put his gun in the office. Then I'm going to get the clerks and clean this store from ceiling to basement — make this place clean enough for a customer to enjoy coming into. It isn't now."

GOODSPEED went back to the wash bench and cleaned the blood and sweat off his face, knowing now that before he had even seen his ranch he had succeeded in piling up the odds against himself. The whole community had transferred their hatred of his uncle to him, and he had already made enemies of the three main men who worked for him.

Dane was a dangerous enemy; Ira Pierce was more dangerous because he was a smart and dogged man, and particularly because he had been publicly humiliated. Wounded pride was a terrible thing.

When Goodspeed took the towel from his face a man was standing looking at him, a smallish bowlegged fellow with broad shoulders and a face as square as a brick, topped with fiery red hair. He had an intense pair of green eyes that were snapping with an anger he was not trying very hard to contain.

"You're Goodspeed?" the man asked in a voice in which anger was close to the surface.

"Yes."

"Then I want my time. I wouldn't work for a blasted outfit like the P. C. if I was starving to death! You can pay me off here and now."

Goodspeed hung the towel on the nail, combed his hair and said, "I just got here. Who are you, friend? And what is it you don't like about the ranch?"

"I don't like anything about it," the man snapped. "My name is Mike Leary and I've been punching cattle an even month for P. C. And in that month I've learned enough about the outfit to know that I don't want any part of it."

"What'd you learn, for instance?"

"That you stole every foot of land you own except the home ranch; that you robbed every man that had a piece of land that you craved, and drove him off down there into the creek bottom. There's people down there starving to death, and now this big rat of a foreman of yours comes around lining up all hands to make a raid on them that already has been robbed, and drive them out of the country."

"When did you hear about this raid being planned?"

"As if you didn't know! Just a few minutes ago, down to the saloon, and from the mouth of Sugar Dane hisself. That's enough for me."

"And he said I ordered it, huh?"

"Sure! Why shouldn't you? You're the owner, ain't you?"

Goodspeed turned this over in his mind, trying to find the meaning of it.

"All right, Mike. I understand we've got an office upstairs here. Let's go up and get this straightened out."

They went up a pine stairway to a long corridor with single bedrooms on either side and a large room across the front of the building which was divided into an office and a kind of card room.

Goodspeed gave the desk a superficial going over, found a bottle and glasses and poured a couple of drinks. Leary refused his. Goodspeed drank his and remarked, "The old man at least had good whisky."

"Now," he said to Leary, "you look like you knew cows."

"I do. And Paradise looked like a mighty nice outfit to me—until I found out how it got that way. I wouldn't stay on it now if you gave it to me!"

"I don't blame you," Goodspeed agreed. "Now, I'm going to tell you something."

GOODSPEED thought a moment, then said:

"I inherited this ranch from an uncle that I hadn't seen since I was a kid. I didn't know he was a land hog. As soon as I found out how things were here, I set in to straighten 'em out. I gave a girl back the land Paradise took away from her father; I'm going to give back every foot of land that he took away from anybody.

"I've already fired Sugar Dane and Ira Pierce and the manager of this store. Dane and Pierce are not taking that laying down, and I haven't got a friend around here. Nobody believes I'm going to straighten things out, not even the people I want to help. They're against me, and Dane and Pierce are against me.

"I've only got a vague idea of what Dane has up his sleeve in ordering that raid, but I'm giving you my word I didn't order it, and furthermore, I'm personally going to stop it. You feel sorry for those nesters; have you got sand enough to help me fight for them?"

"If I lifted a hand, it'd be for 'em instead of against 'em," the red-headed cowpoke exclaimed.

"Well, there it is," concluded Goodspeed. "It's those few nesters and me, and maybe you, against—how many men are on Paradise?"

"About twenty-five regular."

"And they're all lined up with Dane?"

"Most of 'em. He wouldn't have 'em around if they wasn't."

"How about it? You want a fighting job with those odds against you—but to help those nesters?"

Leary picked up his whisky glass and downed it. "I heard about you whipping Dane and Pierce, but I didn't know why. But if you're for protecting them nesters against that pair, then I'm with you."

"All right. We've got the odds against us, but if we happen to come out alive, then you've got you a cow job on a ranch you like. Here's my guess as to what they've got up their sleeves—"

He was interrupted by a yell from downstairs. There was the sound of coarse voices barking orders, the scuffle of rapidly moving feet. Then it was quiet.

Goodspeed was on his feet instantly. He spoke in a low tone.

"Something wrong downstairs. You set for action?"

"Let's go," Leary said, taking his gun from its holster.

They tiptoed down the hall to a point where they could look over the stair rail. Goodspeed saw then what was happening, and he knew for certain the answer to what Pierce planned.

He had to admit that the man had a clever and fast mind.

The three clerks were lined up, holding their hands in the air. In front of them John Smith also stood with hands raised, while two men covered them with guns.

A third man—Sugar Dane—was busy going through the letter files kicking odds and ends out of the way, and then at last opening the safe. Goodspeed saw Dane reach into the unlocked safe and bring out the lock-box containing Paradise Cattle Company's business papers.

Goodspeed had not spun the dial when he placed the box inside, for he did not know the combination and could not have reopened it. Luck had played into Dane's hands.

Goodspeed, hefting his weapon, said over his shoulder, "Let's go." He circled the bannister with Leary beside him, both men covering the three men downstairs.

"Drop that box, Dane!" he shouted, and sent a bullet whining past the foreman's ear.

Dane, who was already headed for the front of the store, spun around, saw the two men on the stairs and fired quickly.

"Get 'em, boys," he yelled to his own men, "while I get this box out!"

Dane's two men forgot the store clerks and turned their wrath on the two men descending the stairs. Dane himself headed for the front door at a run. Goodspeed ignored the men shooting up the stairway at him and gave his full attention to Dane. He could not let that box get away. Now, as he saw it, everything depended on possession of it. If he lost it, he lost everything.

He zigzagged down the stairs amid a hail of lead. A bullet knocked his hat off as he reached the floor. One of the roughs loomed up in front of him and steadied his gun.

Goodspeed blew the man's skull off, jumped over his falling body and kept racing down the aisle.

BEHIND him Leary was blazing away, while the clerks were yelling and scattering to safety. In front of him Dane came to the closed screen door, tried to open it, and in his haste couldn't find the latch.

Goodspeed gained on him.

Dane gave up trying to open the door, and turned suddenly to face the charging Goodspeed. Clinging to the box under his left arm, his face twisted with excitement and rage, he lifted his gun and fired two swift shots at Goodspeed. His hurry spoiled his aim. His first bullet nicked Goodspeed's left arm; the second one bit at the hair of his head.

Goodspeed slid to a stop, took careful aim just as Dane came to the conclusion that he'd better be more careful. They both fired at almost the same moment, but Goodspeed's bullet was the quicker. It tore through the foreman and slammed him down dead, his big body blocking the store entrance.

Goodspeed dashed forward and grabbed the box which had fallen out of Dane's dead hand, and then turned to help Leary. One of the robbers was stretched out dead on the floor. The second one was now disappearing through the rear door leaving a stream of blood behind him.

Leary was standing spraddle-legged, hefting his gun and yelling for him to come back and fight like a man. He seemed to be enjoying it.

Goodspeed reached him and said, "Good work, fellow! You'll do. But this is just the beginning. I've got the whole picture now, and we're going to have to hurry if we save those nesters from being killed. I don't mean driven off their farms—I mean killed. You know the quickest way out to their places?"

"Sure. But—killed?"

"Yep! I know now how Pierce reasons, and according to that he's got to kill 'em."

## CHAPTER V

### *Quit-Claim Deeds*

GOODSPEED joined Smith who was straightening up the office.

"We've got to hurry," he said, "and I need some help. Look through everything here and see if you can find some blank quit-claim deeds, while I go through this box and find all the deeds that the Company has taken from those people they robbed. What I'm going to do is to deed their land back to them."

"Do you have to be in such a hurry about it?" Smith asked. "If you just gave them back the deeds they gave the Company, that ought to satisfy them for a time."

"Not necessarily. You see, these deeds are all registered with the Recorder, and giving them back wouldn't clear the titles until there's another public record of the new transfer of title. But if I give them new deeds, they'll know that all they have to do to get their titles back is to go and register these new deeds.

"Those people haven't got any reason to believe anything I tell them, and they'll just think I'm up to a new trick unless I do it this way. I've *got* to convince them that I mean what I say. Otherwise they'll be killed."

Smith had found a stack of blank deeds, and now he spread them out on the desk and looked for a pen.

"How's believing you going to save their lives?" he asked.

"Here's what Pierce is up to; he and Dane had a hand in getting those deeds under duress. That Blaine girl has been away, apparently, and has come back with the knowledge that her people could make a criminal case against Paradise Cattle Company and all those involved in the business. Pierce and Dane could go to prison for their part in that as long as the victims were alive to appear against them.

"Pierce saw this. But he also saw that if he could get rid of those victims, and me, he and Dane instead of going to prison would still be in possession of Paradise Cattle Company. The whole thing would be theirs, and they would be safer in their possession of it than they ever were before. It was a small gamble for big stakes. With all the legal evidence in their possession, and all the witnesses against them, they'd be on easy street.

"I figure Pierce sent Dane to get the box, which Hemmingway no doubt recognized and told him about, while he organized the Paradise killer crew to go out and wipe out the nesters. I figure they'll be getting under way as soon as it's dark."

"So you've got to help the nesters against the men that work on your own ranch," Smith said. "And that's why you doubt the nesters will believe you. I expect you're right. You're going to have to do some convincing before they'd even think this is not just another trick."

"That's it," Goodspeed agreed. "And while we're doing this, Leary can go to the livery for my horse. And I want some extra guns and ammunition out of the store. A few shotguns, three or four pistols out of stock, and plenty of shells. Have 'em put in a gunny sack and tied on my saddle."

Goodspeed and Smith rapidly made up the new deeds, Goodspeed signed them, and the clerks witnessed them. There were six of them, and when they were turned over to their rightful owners these nesters would have their homes back and Paradise Cattle Company would be reduced to its original holdings. Goodspeed took the deeds and arranged for Smith to keep the box with the rest of the papers in his own safe at the restaurant. They were moving fast now.

Leary returned, and with Goodspeed went out the front door of the store. The sun was low in the west.

"I didn't see any P. C. men on the street or in the saloon when I got my horse," Leary said. "Kinda quiet in town, ain't it?"

"Like the lull before a tornado," Goodspeed answered, mounting his horse. "Well, here we go. Hit for Blaine's first. The girl must have given him back his deed, so he ought to be the easiest to convince."

THEY set out at a fast lope and reached the nester settlement on the river just as the sun made a disk on the horizon. They passed four poor houses along the river lane before coming to Blaine's place.

The Blaine house was an old box affair which leaned away from the wind. It sat under a few trees and had a poor pole barn and lot in the rear. There was a cultivated field across the lane, with a row of head-high weeds separating it from the house.

As Goodspeed and Leary rode up, Sally Blaine and an elderly man stepped out of the front door. Goodspeed raised his hat and spoke. The girl and the man only nodded.

Goodspeed got a glimpse of a face back of the window in the house and had a feeling that somebody in there was covering him with a gun. He dismissed the idea, shuffled through the papers he had carried in his hat and handed the girl one of them.

"I gave you back the quit-claim deed you gave my uncle," he said. "Here's one made by me to your father. All he has to do is to sign it, then have it registered, and his ranch is legally his."

The girl studied the paper and handed it to her father who looked it over, his face showing that he still was distrustful of the whole affair.

THEN Goodspeed handed the rest of the deeds to the girl.

"There are five more sets," he said. "The original ones taken by Paradise, and my own conveying the same land back to the owners. I'd like you to hold them and see that they get into the right hands."

The girl leafed through the papers and read the names on them, and still there was a bewildered look of puzzlement in her face.

"Now," Goodspeed said, "I've got to tell you something I expect you'll find hard to believe, coming from me. I am quite certain that Ira Piercé will be coming this way with a bunch of Paradise hands, with the idea of killing every man whose name is on one of those papers. And here is why—"

Then he told them everything that had happened, and what he expected Pierce to do, and why.

"I'd like you to send somebody up and down this road and get all your friends down here in one place. Get the women to safety. There'll probably be twenty or more in the gang, and we'll have to fight if I'm right. Your men folks stand between Pierce and a fortune on one hand and prison on the other. And he knows he's got to act quick."

The old man had been listening but had not spoken. Now he turned and called, "Johnny!" and the youth in the house came out, leaned a shotgun against the wall and joined them.

"You said Perry Maddigan saw them P. C. riders gathered in that hickory grove up at the head of the creek about an hour ago, didn't you?" the old man queried.

"That's what Perry said. Said they was just lazin' around there, and that others was ridin' in one and two at a time."

The old man turned and looked at Goodspeed. "If this ain't a trick, then I reckon you can understand us not believin' you any too easy. Still, these deeds and all, they look all right. Tell you what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna send the kid and the girl and get these folks out like you say—but if it's a trick, that there shotgun will find you first. That understood?"

"Good enough for me," Goodspeed said. "And here's more guns, in case you all haven't got enough." He took his gunny sack off the saddle and poured out knocked-down shotguns, three pistols and a peck of boxes of assorted shells.

"Your friends might need these," he said. "In the meantime, we might be making some plans. If I know Pierce, he'll hit at dark, and burn everything before him and kill every man he sees. He can't risk doing less."

They covered the ground, picking out good hiding places away from the house, behind clumps of poke weed, in bunches of head-high Johnson grass, around a piece of brush in front of a persimmon thicket.

In the darkness now fast settling, these places of concealment covered the house and allowed for retreat under cover.

The clatter of hooves brought them around to the front of the house, and the girl pulled her horse to a sliding stop and slid to the ground.

"They're coming, Pierce's men! We saw them top the rise just as we got to Maddigan. Maddigan is going to stay and fight, but the rest of the neighbors are coming as fast as they can get the women and children to the safety of the woods."

## CHAPTER VI

*Fire and Lead*

AS THEY spoke, gunfire rattled from the direction of Maddigan's, and two horsemen—a man and a boy—rode up to Blaine's and dismounted. The sound of other approaching horses came to them.

"Get guns and fill your pockets with shells," Goodspeed ordered. "We've got a place for you.

"What're you planning on?" the man asked.

"Pierce will probably tackle every house. May burn 'em all. He's got the odds, so all we can do is to let him ride up to this house and make our stand here, all together."

Two other men had come up as he was talking, and now there was an urgency about their movements as they got ready for battle. Another man rode up, asked questions and filled his pockets with shells for the shotgun he had brought. And then another man came, and that was all.

And by the time Goodspeed had picked places for them, the firing had stopped up at Maddigan's and there was a blaze licking upward into the sky.

"They got the stubborn old fool, I reckon," Blaine observed sadly. "And Pierce will learn quick enough that we're all down here."

"Listen," the girl said. And in the silence they all heard the tromping of a whole cavalcade of hooves. "He's coming all the way this time."

Goodspeed gave one last order.

"Men," he said, "this is mainly between Pierce and me. You concentrate on his men. I'll try to handle Pierce, myself."

They scattered into their hiding places, just as a blood-red moon was lifting over the treetops down on the creek behind them, and just as a line of horsemen pounded up and circled the house.

The shadows of the riders were dim, and they kept moving. Pierce's voice broke the stillness.

"Come out, Blaine. We want to see you! We're not calling again!"

Still the heavy silence, and then Pierce said, "All right, men. Let's don't waste no time!"

There were half a dozen tiny glows of lighted matches, which grew into blazing torches as kerosene-soaked rags on sticks burst into flame. The men on their moving horses got the torches burning hotly, then threw them. Two landed on the roof of the shack and ate greedily at the dry shingles. Others went through the windows, breaking out the glass, and fell inside the two rooms.

"Keep moving, men," Pierce shouted, "and down him when he comes out. Don't stop and make targets of yourselves. This smells like a trap!"

Goodspeed spoke from behind a clump of buck brush. "It *is* a trap, Pierce. We've got you covered in the light of your own fires. Drop your guns and get off your horses! No more warnings! Move!"

Pierce yelled, "Find that hombre! Root 'im out, men. Hit that brush!" His voice was a scream.

His men took up the yell, a dozen guns blasted into the shadows, and the battle was on.

Goodspeed shouted, "All right, farmers. They had their chance!" He jumped up out of his hiding and ran toward Pierce whose horse, frightened at the din, was rearing up on its hind legs.

All around him pistols and shotguns blasted the night air in a hideous din. Horses screamed and pranced, gunmen yelled and fired, and fell off their horses and died. A couple of gunnies couldn't face buckshot and hit it back up the road. The roof of the house made a great torch which was swiftly lighting up the scene of battle.

One rider's horse fell over backward and pinned the man under him, and the man lay and yelled for help and his friends gave him no attention. Pierce yelled curses at his men, tried to shoot Goodspeed, tried to get his panicky animal under control, all at the same time.

Riders pushed through shoulder-high weeds toward the flashes of guns, and met emptiness, or guns from other directions. Everybody was yelling, everybody was shooting, and now the house was a raging inferno of red fire, sending burning embers fifty feet into the air.

GOODSPEED had emptied his gun at Pierce, but in the semidarkness and with Pierce's horse dancing about, his shots had been ineffective. He had

lost his sense of time, and he did not know how the battle was going with the farmers.

Some of Pierce's men were down to rise no more, others were down and wounded, and some had deserted, but Pierce knew this was a fight for his life and he was not giving ground. He was raging and cursing his men and trying to control his horse.

Goodspeed ducked behind a water barrel and reloaded his weapon, then came out again, following Pierce by the sound of his raging voice. Then he saw the marshal.

Pierce's horse had reared up, turning on his hind feet, and when he came down his front feet landed on the side of a downed animal, slid off the soft footing and landed on its front knees. Pierce was out of the saddle and over the horn, landing on the ground on his face. Goodspeed rushed toward him.

"That's all, Pierce," he yelled above the din. "Drop that gun!"

Pierce rolled over sideways, got to his feet like a cat, and in his blind anger started running squarely toward Goodspeed, shooting as he ran. It was unwise, for his shots went wild.

Goodspeed stood his ground, took one slow, careful aim with the bullets flying around him, then pulled his trigger.

Pierce's dead feet carried him half a dozen running steps closer to Goodspeed, and his dead finger pulled his trigger once more, this time sending a bullet through Goodspeed's thigh, knocking him down. Both men lay on the ground.

One of the gunfighters saw Pierce fall, pulled up his horse and shouted, "Pierce is dead, boys. Nothing more for us; I'm getting out!" He turned and spurred his horse out of the fight.

Others heard him and hit the dust, following him, and quickly the thunder died in the night and left only the sound of the crackling blaze consuming the nester house.

Goodspeed was trying to crawl away from the heat when the girl and Leary found him and got him out to the water barrel and started dressing his wounds. The other men trickled in, and only three of them had wounds, superficial at that.

THE girl seemed a bit embarrassed, but forced herself to speak.

"I think we will all believe you now, Mr. Goodspeed," she said. "At first—"

"The name is Jim, Sally, and don't try to explain. I know it's not every day that a land-hog cattle company tries to give back what it stole. But I like this place and I want to live here in peace with my neighbors. There's a lot of details to take care of yet, and I've been wondering if you would be willing to kind of help me with that? You seem to be pretty well informed about the situation between Paradise and your friends."

"I'll help," she promised, "and I do know something about things. You see, I've been away teaching school just to get money to build our case, so now I can use the evidence I've accumulated to get it straightened out peacefully. Paradise Valley will be a real paradise again."

"Yes," Jim Goodspeed thought, but did not say right then, "it will be if I can convince you that I need your help permanently."

What he allowed himself to say was, "I haven't seen my ranch yet. I was wondering if you'd kind of show me around?"

"It's beautiful," she said. "I'd love to."

That, Goodspeed decided, was good enough for a starter on the course he had planned.

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# MAN-BREAKER

## CHAPTER I

### *Range Robbers*

THE three riders still were a quarter of a mile away when Johnny Thunder spotted them. Thinking of the small hoard of raw mountain gold his shaggy pack mule carried, Johnny's smoky blue eyes studied the horsemen suspiciously. Apparently they had seen him and were headed straight toward him.

Johnny grinned then, shrugging broad shoulders. Five months alone in the mountain wilderness had made him jumpy. Probably these three were punchers from some nearby ranch, for at long last he was nearing civilization. But he kept studying the riders warily as they approached at a leisurely gait.

The sky was gray and sullen and a bitter wind swept with a shrill, bugle-like sound down from the haze-shrouded ramparts and across the high range country. Winter was but a stride away and Johnny Thunder realized that he

When they pinched Johnny Thunder's poke the

# RANGE by GUNNISON STEELE

had got out of the mountains not a day too soon. The first blizzard was due. Then this Montana high country would be a wicked land of white death.

Johnny shivered and drew his sheepskin tighter, marking the slow progress of the three riders toward him. He was a rangy, whipcord-tough youngster with hawklike features and shaggy hair the flaming red of a sunset. Buckskin breeches showed below his sheepskin. A horn-handled knife was slung from his belt, along with a long-barreled six-shooter. He wore moccasins, and a string of matched elk teeth about his neck as an ornament.

Johnny Thunder looked tough and he was tough. With that skinning knife he had killed a full-grown, enraged grizzly bear in the mountains. An orphan, his education had been gained in the stern and sometimes brutal school of experience.

So he unbuttoned his sheepskin and watched with a sharpened interest as the three riders pulled their horses to a halt

crooks found it packed with plenty of lightning!

a few yards away. The pack mule stopped instinctively, and Johnny stood with one hand on the burro's shaggy rump.

The three sat there and regarded Johnny Thunder a moment without speaking, their thoughts making three sets of patterns across their contrasting faces. One of them was blocky, powerful, with blunt, heavy-boned features, with stubby arms that carried clublike, hairy fists at their ends.

Another was slender, graceful, with dark, arrogant features that held a feline cruelty and cunning; he had a scimitar-like nose that curved like a knifeblade between his shiny black eyes.

The third rider was rail-thin. He had a thin sandy mustache and chalky eyes. This man had unbuttoned his jacket and now Johnny saw a badge on his shirt.

The chalk-eyed man's voice had a scratchy twang: "Howdy, friend. I'm Joe Badger, deputy sheriff from Gunlock. This," indicating the blocky man, "is Russ Cormant, and the other jigger is Ben Jory. They're partners in the Cross L outfit over yonder a ways."

"Name's Johnny Thunder," the sheepskin-coated man said.

"Where you headed?"

"Gunlock. How far is it?"

"Depends. Where you from?"

"Depends," Johnny Thunder drawled, not liking this. "I been lots of places and I'm from all of 'em. Looks like snow, don't it?"

Ben Jory laughed, a low, amused sound without humor.

The blocky man, Cormant, demanded suddenly, "What you got on that pack mule?"

Cormant's voice, like himself, was blunt and solid. It hit at Johnny Thunder like a fist.

"That, mister," Johnny said flatly, "is *my* business! You buskies lookin' for somethin'?"

"Rustlers," Joe Badger grunted. "Long-loopers drove off a bunch of Cross L cattle last night."

"You figure I've got 'em cached on that pack mule?"

"Maybe you have, at that. Maybe we'd better find out just what you've got in that pack you're so cagey about."

"And maybe you'd like some lead in yore brisket!"

Silence jumped at the little group and held for a moment. The bleak wind whined through the dry buffalo grass and shoved roughly at them. Nobody moved for a moment.

DELIBERATELY, Deputy Joe Badger swung to the ground. Ben Jory nudged his horse to swing in behind Johnny. The lanky redhead stepped away from the burro, a wicked light glowing in his smoky eyes.

Badger asked bluntly, "You meanin' to buck the law, younker?"

"I don't crave to buck anybody," Johnny said stubbornly. "But that pack's mine and what's in it belongs to me."

"Nobody's denyin' that. But I'm the law and I've got my duty to do. Some funny things have been goin' on hereabouts lately. I aim to have a look inside that pack."

Johnny Thunder made a swift decision. He didn't like the looks of these three, especially Cormant and Jory. But after all Joe Badger was the law, and the law didn't go about robbing folks.

"All right," he said. "Have a look. I can tell you what's there. Some camping equipment, a little grub—and a buckskin bag full of gold!"

Badger, his hand already reaching for the pack, became motionless. Ben Jory still smiled coldly. Russ Cormant, who hadn't stirred in his saddle, now licked his heavy lips. "Gold, huh?" Cormant said. "You a prospector?"

"I'm a trapper," Johnny Thunder declared. "I went into the mountains five months ago after pelts. I found a few—but then I found some free gold in a little stream and forgot about furs. I cleaned out the pocket before I had to leave."

"How much?"

"Maybe forty pounds. But go ahead, have a look."

Joe Badger pulled aside the tarp and examined the pack's contents. He unfastened the top of a buckskin bag, and the intake of his breath was like the greedy hiss of a buzzard.

"Gold?" Cormant asked softly.

Badger nodded jerkily, watching the yellow stuff dribble between his clawed fingers.

"We expected plews—and find gold. We're in luck!"

Johnny Thunder's eyes narrowed down. He looked at Cormant and saw the predatory, scheming look on the man's heavy face. He turned his head to stare at Ben Jory, slightly behind him,

and saw Jory's cold, brash smile.

"A three-way split ain't much," Badger complained, starting to lift the bag from the pack.

"Let it alone!" Johnny said sharply. "A tin badge don't give you the right to what's mine!"

Badger said, "Friend, this yellow stuff is ours."

Sensing fully what was happening, Johnny Thunder grabbed for his bone-handled six-shooter.

He heard a quick hammering of hoofs, and as he half-swung he saw Jory's big black horse rushing at him. He saw the gun in Jory's hand, heard Jory's cruel, cynical laugh. He flung himself desperately aside, trying to avoid the downward swing of that clubbed gun, wondering why Jory didn't just shoot him.

Fierce pain rushed through him as the gun barrel slapped against his skull. He dropped to his knees, still trying to draw his gun. But he couldn't, and he fell forward on his face, knowing with a wild bitterness the taste of defeat.

He didn't lose consciousness. He could hear low voices. He knew that somebody had taken his gun and skinning knife. After a moment he rolled over and sat up.

All three of the men had dismounted now. They stood watching Johnny Thunder, their faces cold and still and wicked.

"Get up," Cormant ordered.

Johnny got slowly to his feet, struggling with his volcanic, outraged fury. His eyes were like smoke-tainted ice as he looked at the three.

He said, "So you buzzards are takin' my mineral?"

"We've took it," Cormant grunted. "You're on Cross L land and we're chargin' yuh yore poke for crossin' it. You're lucky, at that. We could have killed yuh just as well for attempted assault on an officer of the law."

"Law officer, hell!" Johnny sneered. "You're slimy, thievin' skunks! The only way you can get away with stealin' that gold is to kill me."

"We can do that, if we have to. Give him his canteen, Joe."

BADGER held a canteen in his hands—Johnny's own can from his pack—and now he held this out to Johnny.

Johnny took it and asked, "What's this for?"

"Over yonder, twelve-fifteen miles," Russ Cormant said, pointing, "is Gunlock. You might get thirsty before you get there. Can't nobody say we mistreat anybody. Start walkin', if yuh crave to get there before it starts snowin'!"

"When I get there," Johnny promised, "I'll see the sheriff—if he don't turn out to be just as crooked as you snakes!"

"His name's Sam Durant," Jory spoke up. "See him if you want to. We're in the clear."

Johnny pushed back the words that rose to his lips. Something here didn't track at all. These three were hijacking him, yet they were letting him live, were even giving him his canteen so he wouldn't get thirsty on his trek to Gunlock.

That badge Joe Badger was wearing had fooled him, thrown him off guard. They had him cold turkey. They could kill him, and he knew it wasn't any feeling of mercy that kept them from doing it. They were human wolves.

"Start walkin'!" Cormant ordered.

Although vengeful rage seethed inside him, Johnny Thunder muttered, "I reckon I know when I'm licked. I can grabble more gold. I'm headin' for Gunlock."

Nobody said anything. They watched as Johnny turned and trudged away from the spot, the canteen slung over his shoulder.

As he topped a rise a hundred yards away, Johnny glanced back. Cormant, Jory and Badger were grouped about the burro, apparently arguing. Like buzzards, Johnny thought bitterly, quarreling over carrion.

The part he couldn't understand was why they had let him go. This was wild frontier country, but there was supposed to be some kind of law here against thievery. Maybe, he decided, the Gunlock sheriff was in with them.

He walked doggedly on. A blue-black haze lay over the uplands, with the higher peaks of the Ramparts entirely hidden by mist or snow. The wind wrestled and mauled at him.

Johnny Thunder stopped trying to puzzle it out and bent all his energy toward reaching shelter before the blizzard broke. It was now midday. He would be lucky to reach Gunlock before dark came down, if he didn't miss it altogether.

It was cold, but walking made him dry.

He'd gone only a couple of miles when he stopped, unscrewed the top from the canteen, lifted it to his lips.

A voice struck sharply at him: "Don't drink that water—it's poisoned!"

## CHAPTER II

### *Trail to Gunlock*

JOHNNY THUNDER froze motionless, stark amazement flooding through him. He turned his head slowly to stare at a ragged mass of cliffs fifty yards to his right. The voice had come from those cliffs. It had been a soft, clear voice—a girl's voice!

He could see nothing. But the voice came at him again, swift and urgent.

"Pretend to drink the water, but don't do it! They followed you and they're watching you, to make certain you die."

Johnny asked blankly, "Who are you?"

"Never mind about that, now. They didn't shoot you because they didn't want a body to be found with bullet holes in it, so they poisoned the water. Pretend to drink, and then after a moment fall down and pretend to die. It's your only chance!"

"But I don't savvy how—"

"Do you want to live, or die?" The girl's voice was like a whiplash. "Cormant and Jory are watching you from a jack-pine grove back yonder. Don't look back and don't look toward me. I'll explain after they leave, if I have the chance. Go on—do like I say!"

Johnny Thunder caught the frantic urgency behind that melodious voice, and he made another swift decision. He lifted the canteen deliberately to his lips. But he didn't drink. He placed his tongue over the opening and held it there until he lowered the canteen. Then he carelessly swiped a sleeve across his lips, wiping the moisture from his tongue.

He slung the canteen back to his shoulder and walked on. But he'd gone only a few steps when he stopped again. He raked a hand across his eyes as if bewildered. Then he clutched suddenly at his stomach as if pain had lanced sharply through him. He might as well, he decided, play this game to the hilt.

He swayed, staring dazedly about. He staggered a few steps, stopped again, unscrewed the top from the canteen and smelled its contents. As if realizing suddenly what had happened, he flung the can savagely to the ground. The water trickled out onto the hard earth.

Then Johnny Thunder went through all the contortions he imagined a man dying of deadly poison would go through. He dropped to his knees first, clawing at his throat and stomach, then fell forward to the ground where he lay writhing and kicking.

He glanced along the earth back the way he had come. Two horsemen had come from a jack-pine thicket and were riding at a gallop toward him. Cormant and the dark-faced Ben Jory. So the unseen girl, whoever she was, had called the cards right.

With a final, convulsive jerk Johnny lay still, his eyes closed. He heard the hoofbeats drawing closer and closer, until they stopped with a final clatter only a few yards away.

He felt the hot, probing stare of cruel eyes. He lay very still, barely breathing, eyes tightly closed.

"Buzzard bait, for sure," he heard Cormant growl.

"You must have put a whoppin' dose of that stuff in the water," Jory said. "It worked powerful fast. Maybe we better put a slug—"

"No, cuss it! That's why I doctored that water. A blizzard's blowin' up, and by the time the body's found won't nobody be able to say he wasn't caught out and froze to death. I'll just pitch his pistol and knife down beside him to make it look natural."

Johnny Thunder heard two thuds on the ground beside him. He had to fight himself to keep from grabbing up the gun and blazing away at the two murderous thieves. But he couldn't be sure they hadn't taken the cartridges from the old Peacemaker.

"Well, let's get outa here," Cormant said.

There was a quick thud of hoofs, the sounds gradually fading. After a couple of minutes Johnny opened his eyes. The two riders were just vanishing over a distant rise.

JOHNNY sat up, got to his feet and looked toward the cliff. A rider was coming from a break in the walls and was moving toward him. It was, he

saw, a girl. She came up close to him and leaped lithely to the ground.

"Are you all right?" she asked anxiously.

He nodded, staring at her, and not altogether because she was the first woman he had seen in over five months. She was dressed in denims, boots and a great-coat that failed to hide the slender fullness of her young body. Tawny hair showed beneath a fur cap. She was red-lipped, blue-eyed, as pretty as a girl well could be.

"I'm all right," he said. "Who are you, and how'd you know that water was poisoned?"

"My name's Jan McKay." There was a soft, rich quality to her voice. "I was watching and saw them stop you back yonder on the plain. I guessed they'd poisoned the water when they gave you the canteen and let you go, for I knew they'd never let you live to tell what had happened."

"You know them jiggers?"

"Yes!" A shadow crossed her face, but she looked steadily at him. "Russ Cormant is my uncle, my mother's brother. Both my parents are dead and I live at the Cross L with Cormant and Ben Jory. Cormant is my guardian until I come of age."

Johnny stared at her.

"Then why in thunderation did you do this?"

"Because I hate them!" she burst out bitterly. "I hate their cruelty and wickedness! This isn't the first time they've tried this. Usually it's furs, but they steal anything they can lay their hands to. They brought in two pack mules loaded with pelts a week ago. I don't know where they got them."

"Won't this get you in trouble with them?" Johnny was frowning.

"They won't know. That's why I stayed out of sight. They'd have shot you, back there, if they hadn't counted on your drinking the water and dying."

Johnny Thunder took his gun and knife from the ground.

He said grimly, "I aim to get back my mineral."

She nodded. "I know you'll try. But remember this: They're as mean and treacherous as wolves. If they find out you're alive they'll try to kill you quick before you can talk."

"I can play rough. Where'll I find 'em?"

"Maybe at the ranch, maybe in town. But don't go to the ranch. Maybe in town you can get help. They'll show up there tomorrow at the latest."

He said slowly, "Seein' Russ Cormant is your uncle—"

"I said I hated him, didn't I?"

"All right. I don't reckon you'd want any thanks, would you?"

"No. I'm glad I could save you." Her eyes lowered before his steady gaze and she added, "I'd have done it for anybody."

"I'll move on toward Gunlock. Maybe I can thank you in a better way than with words. So long!"

He had gone only a few steps when her voice reached out at him: "Wait! It's ten miles to Gunlock, and it'd be dark, maybe snowing, before you could walk it. My roan packs double."

He stopped. He knew that what she said was true, and impatience rode him hard.

"You sure it won't get you in trouble?"

"I'll take the chance. I won't ride into town." She swung quickly and gracefully into the saddle, held her foot out of the stirrup for him to mount behind her.

As Johnny Thunder swung up behind the saddle her tawny hair brushed against his face. The rangy roan, not liking this too much, jumped sideways, catching him off-balance. He curled an arm about her slender waist and she looked back at him, laughing.

Johnny Thunder's face turned the color of his hair.

They rode on to the east, toward Gunlock. The wind came at them in gusty, violent puffs. The twilight deepened. From toward the far mountains they seemed to hear a restless sound like the rustle of giant unseen wings.

Jan McKay said, "It's going to storm."

"Let it," Johnny said. "I'll get back my gold. Is this Joe Badger a real deputy sheriff?"

"Yes. He serves under Sheriff Sam Durant."

"Durant a skunk like these others?"

"I think he's honest. But you'll have to be careful, Johnny."

They rode on, not talking much, across the darkening plain. They didn't need words to draw them closer together, spiritually as well as physically. They both were young, both were alone and in trouble.

Full night was coming down when the orange glow of Gunlock's lighted windows appeared on the prairie before them. Jan McKay stopped the roan and Johnny swung down.

She said, "You can get a room at the Yuma House near the head of the street. Do you have any money?"

"Some. How would I get to the Cross L?"

She told him, and added, "Be careful, Johnny."

"I won't forget what you done, and I'll be seein' you," he said, and watched as she wheeled the roan and vanished quickly into the windy shadows.

Johnny Thunder turned and trudged toward the lights. He came to the head of a street stretching between two rows of frame buildings that was laced with yellow shafts of light from doorways and windows. Gunlock seemed to huddle in misery before the onslaught of the storm. The town was quiet, with only a few horses at tie racks.

In the dim light of a wall-bracketed lamp he saw a sign across the front of a two-story building that said: "YUMA HOUSE." He turned in here, found himself in the lobby of a hotel that was well-crowded with people, both men and women, who stared openly at his gaunt, buckskin-clad figure as he crossed to the clerk's desk.

Johnny Thunder ignored them.

He paid for a small, unheated room in the second story, went up and moments later descended to the lobby again.

He asked the pale, skinny clerk, "Where can I find the sheriff?"

"His office is three doors down the street. Might be there. Lives in a cabin at the edge of town. Trouble?"

"Might be," Johnny Thunder said, and went out into the wind-lashed street.

The wind shoved him roughly along the plank walk. The night was noisy and uneasy and cold.

## CHAPTER III

### *Buzzard Bait*

THREE doors from the hotel he looked through a lighted window and saw a rawboned, mustached man sitting before a glowing stove. He pushed open the door and entered.

The rawboned man looked up quickly, riveting Johnny Thunder with a pair of frosty eyes. Johnny closed the door and stood with his back to it.

He measured this wary-eyed oldster carefully, noticing the coldness of his eyes, the bulldog set of his angular jaw, the tightness of his down-curling lips.

"You the sheriff?" he asked.

"Sam Durant's the name. What can I do for you?"

Johnny countered. "You got a deputy named Joe Badger?"

"Sure have." The sheriff's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "But he's not in town. Went out chousin' some rustlers this mornin' and ain't got back. What yuh want with him?"

"Personal business. You know a couple of huskies named Russ Cormant and Ben Jory?"

The gaunt sheriff faced Johnny fully, his cold eyes studying the redhead with a steadily sharpening attention.

"I know 'em. Maybe you better tell me yore name and business, Redhead."

"Name's Johnny Thunder. Ridin' grubline."

The sheriff's gaze raked Johnny Thunder's buckskin breeches, his coonskin cap and moccasins. He grunted skeptically.

"Don't look like a puncher to me."

"A buzzard doesn't look ugly either, when he's sailin' high in the sky. So long."

"Wait!" Durant said sharply as Johnny turned and opened the door. "Redhead, I'm warnin' you to walk a straight line here. Start any kind of ruckus and I'll jail you. You come here to say somethin' and now you've changed yore mind. What was it?"

"Never mind," Johnny said, and went back into the street.

His experience out there on the prairie had made him wary. He wasn't certain whether or not Sam Durant was in with those other three, and if he made a mistake here it might be his last one. Anyhow, Johnny Thunder wasn't used to asking somebody else to settle his troubles.

His anger toward the three who had hijacked him was just as sharp and wicked as it had ever been. They were the ones he wanted to see. He started prowling the town in search of them.

But after making the rounds of the saloons he was forced to the conclusion

that none of the three had showed up in town, and probably wouldn't this night. He returned to the hotel.

The storm came that night, rushing like an angry white giant across the prairie, snarling and bellowing its outrage. A screaming wind drove sleet and snow before it.

By dawn the wind had slackened somewhat in ferocity, but four inches of snow covered the earth and still fell steadily. It was bitterly cold. Johnny Thunder shivered as he shouldered his way along the snow-blown street toward a restaurant.

After eating, he started his prowl again through the frozen, white-curtained town. One fixed purpose was in his mind—to find one or all of the three who had robbed him. He wouldn't be caught napping again, he wouldn't let a tin badge draw him into a trap.

Johnny Thunder had gained his views on right and justice on the wild wilderness fur trails, and he had learned that sometimes a man had to make his own law to survive.

The law had helped rob him and he didn't aim to depend on the law to get back what was his. He meant to do it himself. So he went from saloon to saloon.

The storm didn't stop the flow of traffic along the street. Most of the riders were inbound, in town for whisky and cards and companionship, many to ride the storm out.

Johnny Thunder was staring through a saloon window when he saw Joe Badger, Cormant and Ben Jory ride along the street. He saw the gaunt deputy swing into a rack before the sheriff's office, dismount and go inside.

Cormant and Jory continued on to a tie bar before the Jubilee Saloon, almost directly across the street from the one Johnny was in.

The Cross L partners dismounted, slapping snow from their clothes, and went into the Jubilee.

JOHNNY THUNDER pushed himself away from the bar. He crossed the room, opened the door and went out. Lowering his head against the rough drive of the snow, he angled across the snow-curtained street toward the Jubilee, a scalding anger pouring through him.

He was not devious of thought or action. When trouble was to be faced he met it head-on.

He opened the door and walked straight into the Jubilee, his sheepskin open and his long-barreled .45 pulled forward. He stopped, swiping the snow from his eyes.

The big room, its walls lined with the mounted heads of deer, antelope and bear, was crowded, pungent with the smell of smoke, whisky and sweat. A mahogany bar extended across the entire rear end of the room.

Cormant and Jory stood at the bar, near a window, their backs to Johnny Thunder. They hadn't seen him enter. Nobody paid any particular attention to him.

On silent, moccasined feet he crossed the room and stopped near the two. Deliberately he drew his gun.

He said, "All right, you two thievin' buzzards—turn around!"

That flat, wintry voice cut like a knife through the smoky tumult of the room. It brought a silence as complete as if a turned-on faucet had cut off its flow. The gaze of every man in the room moved to that shaggy-haired, buckskin-clad figure.

That voice jerked Cormant and Jory about, whisky spilling from the glasses in their hands. It drove the color from their faces, it sprung their eyes wide with stark surprise as they saw Johnny Thunder. They stood very still, looking as if death had jumped suddenly at them out of the storm.

"I ought to kill you two like the yellow dogs you are!" Johnny said coldly. "Like you tried to kill me. Where's the gold?"

Jory was the cooler of the two and recovered his wits more quickly. He darted a glance at Cormant, he raised the glass slowly to his lips and sipped the whisky.

"You drunk, buckskin?" he murmured. "Or maybe you mistook us for somebody else."

"It was you two that made the mistake, not me! Yore mistake was in turnin' me loose with a pizened canteen of water instead of shootin' me."

"I don't know what you mean—"

"That's a scabby lie! You took my gold, you and that fake deputy, and I aim to have it back. You got just thirty seconds to tell me where it is!"

Jory flicked a glance about the room,

shrugging, puzzlement making a pattern over his dark face. He wanted the spectators to see that this was all a mystery to him.

Russ Cormant stirred heavily. He growled, "You been livin' with the Injuns too long and it's drove you loco. Put up that gun and get outa here or I'll tear yuh apart!"

"I'd like to watch that," Johnny Thunder grinned wickedly, "if I had the time. Maybe later, if you live—which you won't if you don't start talkin' quick!"

The room was quiet for a moment then, with the two distinct sounds from outside intruding: the bleak whine of the wind along the street, and the swift thud of two pairs of boots along the boardwalk.

Both Cormant and Jory knew the deadliness of this. They knew that they had bungled, knew that Johnny Thunder would kill them if they moved crooked. Johnny's attention was dead-centered on them, the gun cocked, his mind made up.

"Look, Redhead," Jory said placatingly, "we didn't take your gold. But even say we did. Put up that gun and we'll—"

"Shut up!" Johnny spat. "Talkin' won't save yore hides—"

"Nor yores," a cold voice clipped, "if you don't drop that smoke-pole, quick!"

JOHNNY had heard the door open but hadn't dared turn his head. That icy voice he recognized as belonging to Sheriff Sam Durant. He knew that Durant would have a gun in his hand. Two men had come into the room and the second would probably be Joe Badger.

He had two seconds of indecision. He could whirl and have his wild try at Durant and Badger—in which case he would place his back to Cormant and Jory. He measured his chances and knew bitterly that he had none.

"Drop it, Redhead, or I'll blow yuh apart!"

Johnny Thunder dropped the gun. He turned slowly. Sheriff Durant and Joe Badger were crossing the room. Both had guns in their hands.

"That's him," Badger declared excitedly. "I had a good look at him before he got into the timber, and that's the busky!"

The sheriff took Johnny's gun from the floor, saying, "I warned you about startin' a ruckus!"

Johnny said nothing. He watched this with a narrow, bitter interest, trying to decide what he had to do.

Cormant and Jory had stepped away from the bar, relief and mystification on their faces. Johnny saw Badger dart a warning glance at them.

Durant said grimly, "When I told Joe here about you asking for him, and described you, he spotted you right quick. He said you belonged to that gang of rustlers him and Cormant and Jory trailed into the roughs and had a run-in with. He said they shot yore horse, but you escaped into some timber afoot and they couldn't find you. We saw you come in here a minute ago."

"You sure this is him, Joe?" the sheriff added.

"'Course I'm sure!" Joe Badger declared, glaring at Johnny. "I got a good look at him. He's the leader of the skunky cow stealers!" He wheeled to Cormant and Jory. "You both saw him—that's him, ain't it?"

Cormant, still not quite grasping this, scowled.

Jory said quickly:

"Sure it is. I thought I winged him as he went into the timber, but I guess not. He had the gall to come in here and accuse us of stealin' some gold, or somethin'."

"Sheriff, you're makin' a bad mistake!" Johnny Thunder burst out. "They're feedin' you a mess of lies. I brought a poke full of gold down out of the mountains. These three snakes stopped me out on the prairie, took my mineral, set me afoot with a canteen of pizened water.

"Only—" he paused, thinking of Jan McKay. "Only I didn't drink the water. They're thievin' buzzards, not me. All I want is my gold back."

Plain disbelief showed in the sheriff's frosty eyes.

"Why didn't you tell me that when you talked to me?"

Johnny hesitated again. It wouldn't do any good to tell the sheriff he hadn't trusted him, and still didn't. He saw how completely he had been whipsawed again.

He said furiously, "You dirty, stinkin' *carcajous!*"

"I'll lock you up, younker," Durant said, jerking his gun muzzle. "Step out!"

Ben Jory stepped up beside Johnny, saying, "I'd better have that knife," and reached for the blade at Johnny's waist.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Blizzard Bullets*

JOHNNY THUNDER moved with amazing quickness. He wrapped a long arm about Jory's neck, he swung Jory violently, so that the dark killer made a shield between him and the guns of Durant and Badger. He snaked his other hand up under Jory's coat and slid Jory's gun from its holster.

He swung the gun, clubbing Cormant over the head as the blocky man ran at him. Stunned, Cormant staggered back against the bar.

The room was in an uproar. Men yelled, seeking places of shelter from the bullets they expected to fly. Durant and Joe Badger were jumping about, trying to get in a shot at Johnny. Jory struggled violently, his boot heels hammering the floor.

Johnny hissed at him, "Stay still, blast you, or I'll blow yore yella spine loose!"

Jory quieted, struggling for breath as Johnny dragged him across the floor toward the window. He held Jory in an iron grip, feeling the dark and wild and treacherous undercurrents of this room swirl about him.

Badger yelled wildly, "Break away, Ben, so I can put a slug in him!" And Durant said in a quieter voice, "Don't be a fool, younker—turn him loose and give me that gun!"

"I'll give you a bellyful of hot lead," Johnny said savagely, "if you follow me!"

With a heave of his powerful shoulders he threw Jory full at Durant and Badger. The hurling body slammed into the sheriff driving him sideways into Badger, and for a second both were thrown off balance.

Johnny Thunder wheeled and dived headlong through the window, arms upflung to protect his face from shattered glass. He heard the rocketing blast of a gun in the room as he went through the window and landed on hands and knees in the drifted snow of a narrow, shadowy alley. He dropped the gun, clawed frantically for it, found it and came up running.

He ran full-tilt from the alley into the windy street. Directly before him was a rack where stood several saddled horses. He made his choice quickly—a big, powerful black belonging to Ben Jory—and ran at it.

Pandemonium was loose in the saloon behind him, rolling in waves through the walls and into the street. Another gunshot blasted and a man's shrill yell lifted. The front door slammed open and two men, pressed by those behind them, stumbled out.

When Johnny Thunder, now in the saddle, drove a shot close to their feet they fought to get back inside, but the pressure behind them was too great.

Russ Cormant came through the cluster, flinging men right and left with his stubby, powerful arms. He brought up the gun in his hand, but a shoulder rammed him and his first shot went wild.

Bent low in the saddle, Johnny Thunder raced along the street. Sounds raced after him in magnified resonance—gunfire, the pound of boots, the yelling of men. He looked back through the curtain of snow—and at that instant the black faltered, stumbled, almost fell.

But the powerful beast regained its stride and ran on, and seconds later the buildings of Gunlock were lost in the snow. The sounds of turmoil faded.

He let the black run, knowing he was following some kind of trail. He didn't know where it led and didn't much care. Since the day before his anger had been a dark and wicked thing pushing him toward rash action, and it remained that. He didn't know just what he had expected to happen when he braced Cormant and the others who had robbed him, but not this.

He hadn't expected to be running into the storm, himself a wanted man. But here it was, and there was no turning back.

He still didn't know whether Sheriff Durant was in with the Cross L killers and Joe Badger. It mattered little now. They knew his horse was hit, and they'd be after him like a wolf pack after a crippled deer in the storm. At least three of them would want him dead.

He turned his head, straining eyes and ears back toward Gunlock. But the wind yelled and mauled at him, the snow speared like a million tiny lances into his face and eyes. He thought he heard a gunshot but he couldn't be sure.

The black was bad hit, all right. It ran with a choppy, uneven stride now. Johnny Thunder stopped, dismounted.

The bullet had entered low in the right flank. It was a nasty wound, one that would stop the black sooner or later. Johnny remounted and rode on at a slower pace.

A mile, two miles. The close-hemming world about him was a white, tumultuous one. He crossed a narrow, rushing stream—and soon after that he heard what he had been listening for: the rushing pound of hoofs on the trail behind him!

INSTANTLY, Johnny pulled the reeling black off the trail and into a snow-weighted jack-pine thicket.

Four riders came out of the snow curtain, riding fast. Peering through an opening in the snowy thicket, Johnny Thunder recognized them. In the lead was Sheriff Sam Durant. Closely following the gaunt old lawman were Cormant, Jory and Joe Badger. They were peering eagerly through the half-light.

Johnny heard Cormant yell, "The black's hard hit—I saw him stagger. He won't run far!"

"Not much farther than this," Badger called. "Pretty soon he'll be afoot, runnin' and hidin' like a rabbit. We'd better spread out. When you see him—"

Badger's words were whipped away by the wind's howl. They rode on, vanishing in the snowy curtain, but not before Johnny had seen Cormant and Badger leave the trail, one to each side.

He huddled there in the thicket, undecided. The black was through, right now. It stood spread-legged, head drooping, its breathing harsh and ragged. It couldn't run any more. He took saddle and bridle from the animal, knowing nothing could save it, wishing he could end the beast's misery quickly with a bullet.

He left the thicket, but he didn't return to the trail. He hugged a row of cedars, made his way back to the stream and burrowed into a belt of timber that rimmed it. The creek, rushing between its icy banks, covered the sounds of his passage.

He knew his chances were very slim now. He couldn't go back to town and he didn't have any friends on this range. None except Jan McKay— Johnny Thunder stopped, eyes narrowing with thought. Why not?

Cormant and Jory wouldn't be at the ranch. Jan had helped him once and he figured she'd help him again. Anyway, he didn't have much choice.

The black, he knew, had been carrying him in the general direction of the Cross L. It lay several miles to the north. This stream, he knew from what Jan had told him, flowed within fifty yards of the ranchhouse. So he followed the stream, knowing it would be his only chance ever to find the ranch in the storm.

It was hard going along the stream, for spray had caught on the rocks and grass and frozen solid. The wind funneled between the banks, bleak and brutal, driving the snow like pellets. Johnny floundered, fell, rose again. He cursed the snow, the icy earth, the mauling wind, and the luck that had brought him to this.

He lost all track of time or distance or direction. All he knew was that he was following the creek and that it should take him to the Cross L. Maybe, if he reached there, he would find sanctuary—and maybe he would find death.

He stopped suddenly, standing like a white statue against the wind, listening. And the sound came again, faint and flat in the storm, but unmistakable.

A gunshot!

Then a shout lifted, high and wordless, coming down the wind.

Johnny Thunder stood motionless, tension mounting inside him. Those shots, he knew, although close had not been fired at him.

What did they mean, then?

There were no more shots, nothing at all except the sounds of the storm. He was about to fade back into the thickets when something moved suddenly out of the snow curtain toward him. He froze motionless again.

It was, he saw, a horse and rider. They were moving slowly along the creek bank directly toward him. The rider was hunkered forward in the saddle, like a man asleep.

Fresh hope surged through Johnny Thunder. He drew his gun and waited. The horse saw him and lifted its head curiously but came on, and when the beast was only a few feet away Johnny jumped forward and grabbed the reins.

The startled horse reared, almost throwing the rider.

"All right, mister!" Johnny said harshly. "Wake up and grab some snowflakes! I'm takin' this horse!"

The snow-covered rider lifted his

head then, and with a little shock Johnny saw that it was Sheriff Sam Durant.

THE sheriff stared dully at Johnny, his bony face gray and lined with pain. Johnny saw that he was holding one hand pressed tightly against his chest up under his coat. With his other hand he made a small gesture.

Johnny said sharply, "Let the gun alone! And get down off that bronc!"

Durant didn't move. He said weakly, "I might fall off. And I've got no gun, younker. I lost it when I was shot back there and fell off my horse. I like not to got back on. I'm pretty bad hit. That ought to make you happy."

"I didn't shoot you," Johnny said quickly. "Maybe I would have if I'd got the chance—maybe I should now—but I didn't."

"I didn't say you did. I saw the bush-whackin' son that done it. He figured he'd killed me when his slug knocked me from the saddle and didn't wait to see. What you want with this hoss?"

"Why you think? I aim to get long gone from this snake-crooked range. I didn't steal no cattle!"

"I know you didn't."

Johnny stared amazedly at the gray-faced lawman.

"Then why in thunderation did you try to jail me?"

"It's a long story and I ain't got time to tell it now," the sheriff said. "I've lost some blood and I've got to have shelter and attention, or freeze. Get up behind me, kid, and we'll head for Gunlock."

"So you can jail me?"

"I don't want to jail you, never did. I'll tell you what's what when we get to my place in Gunlock."

Johnny Thunder shook his head with stubborn suspicion.

"Me trust a badge-toter after what's happened?" he sneered. "I like it better the other way. Fall off that jughead!"

"Johnny," the sheriff said slowly, "you can drag me off this hoss and leave me here in the snow to die. I couldn't stop you. Or you can take my word I'm on the level—only make up your mind quick!"

Johnny made his choice quickly, as he always did. Only a fool could fail to see that a lot of things didn't track here. Who had shot Sam Durant, and why?

He put his foot in the stirrup and swung up behind the wounded sheriff.

He said curtly, "I'll keep my gun handy!"

"And be ready to use it," Durant said.

## CHAPTER V

### *Blizzard Pact*

THEY moved on along the creek, back toward the trail that would take them to Gunlock. And the sheriff, conscious but silent and seemingly lifeless in the saddle, stayed clear of the trail, keeping the horse to the timber as much as possible. From this Johnny knew that he was hiding from somebody.

Later, nearing Gunlock, Durant roused, mumbled, "My cabin's at the edge of town—we'll go there."

Moments later the horse stopped before a three-room log house. Nearby was a small barn. No other structure was visible in the weird twilight.

Johnny helped the sheriff from the saddle and almost carried him into the front room of the cabin. The room was cold. It was simply furnished, containing a bed, stove, bureau and several chairs. Sheriff Durant fell with a gusty sigh of relief onto the bed.

"Times I thought I wouldn't make it," he murmured, "but I did, thanks to you, kid. Make a fire. Pull the shades over the windows and make a light."

Johnny drew the thin, cracked shades and lit a lamp. He touched a match to the kindling in the sheet-iron stove, and when it was blazing he piled in wood. Heat began to spread over the room.

"Somebody," Durant said softly from the bed, "has been here since I left. May be still here—"

A door at the back of this room opened abruptly and Jan McKay stepped through. She was swathed in a furry coat and below her fur cap her small tanned face showed grimly determined. In her hand was a slender-barreled .38.

"Me," she said. "I've been waiting here for you, sheriff!"

Durant said, "Well, now, that's fine. What's the gun for?"

Jan glanced quickly at Johnny Thunder. Something in her eyes made Johnny's heart do queer things.

She said, "I didn't expect Johnny. But now that he's here I aim to give him

his chance if he wants it. I heard what happened, heard he was running. He didn't steal any cattle!"

Johnny grinned, said, "It's all right, Jan. Sheriff didn't bring me here—I brought him. Put up the gun."

Her puzzlement remained, but she obeyed. Durant watched her out of wise old eyes.

"You saved Johnny Thunder once, and was ready to do it again even if it put you against the law. Jan, you don't have much of yore Uncle Russ Cormant's blood in you."

She said scornfully, "None of it. I hate him!"

"Which will make this easier. Now you're here, you might as well hear what I've got to say." And then to Johnny: "Kid, I can talk while you look at the hole in my shoulder."

Johnny helped the sheriff off with his mackinaw and cut away his blood-stained shirt. The bullet, while making a nasty-looking wound, had been low and had entered the flesh without breaking a bone. Jan had put water on the stove to heat, and found clean rags for bandages.

DURANT said, as Johnny started washing the wound, "Why'd you come here, Jan?"

"To tell you what I saw happen out on the prairie and try to convince you that Johnny is innocent," she said quickly. "I saw Cormant, Jory and Joe Badger—"

"I know about that," the sheriff nodded grimly. "Johnny told me when I went to arrest him."

Johnny asked in angry amazement, "If you believed me, why'd yuh try to jail me?"

"For yore own good, mostly. I'd told Badger about you comin' into my office and askin' some questions, and described you. Right quick, Joe made up that poppycock about you bein' one of the rustlers that had escaped. I didn't believe it because I don't figure any Cross L cows were stolen in the first place. Any cattle rustled on this range lately was rustled *by* Cross L and not *from* them!

"I've knowed for some time that Cormant and Jory were as slick and crooked as two eels fightin', and that Joe Badger was in with them. So, when you told me about them three stoppin' you out on the prairie and robbin' you of yore gold poke, I believed it. But I knew they were all set to kill you, and I figured jail was the safest place for you until I could get my loop dabbed on them snakes.

"If I'd made a play there, they'd maybe have salted both of us. 'Course I didn't figure on you makin' the fool play you did. After that I had to try to find you, 'cause I knew them three would be after you like wolves, aimin' to salt you."

"Who shot you?"

"It was my own deputy, Joe Badger," the old sheriff said grimly. "I saw him just as he cut down on me from a jack-pine thicket. They had it figured pretty good. They thought to kill me out there in the storm and shoulder the blame onto you. If they could roast you out and shoot you, fine—if not, you were saddled with a murder anyway and no danger to them."

"Sure," Johnny said. "That the only reason they wanted you dead?"

Durant shook his head. "They're ambitious, they want free run of this range for their crookedness. They couldn't do it long as I was sheriff. So they decided to kill me and put Joe Badger in my place. Then the road would be open for their thievin' and killin'. Today they saw their chance. Lucky Joe Badger thought I was dead when he saw me fall into the snow. Lucky you were close and brought me in, younker."

"Yeah," Johnny breathed. "But what now? When they find out you ain't dead—"

"That's why I sneaked in here the back way. If they knew I was alive they'd be after me because I saw Badger shoot me. They'd be after both of us, kid. So long as they're runnin' loose we're both half dead. Bad part is, I'm in no shape to put up a fight."

He turned to the girl. "Jan, you know where they cached the younker's gold?"

Jan said immediately, "In the cellar under the front room, where some other stolen stuff is hidden. There's a bear-skin over the trapdoor." She looked carefully at the sheriff, at Johnny, memories darkening her eyes.

"Cormant's my uncle but I hate him. I hate both of them, and Badger's no better. They're as cruel and wicked as hungry wolves. Jory wants me, and Russ Cormant has been trying to force me into marrying him. I could tell a lot more about them—"

"We know enough," Durant said

gently. Johnny Thunder had finished bandaging his shoulder now, and stepped back. "Maybe you'll get a chance to help put a noose about their necks, later. Now you'd better get out of here—no tellin' what's liable to happen. Where's yore horse?"

"In the barn." Jan buttoned her great-coat tightly about her chin, looking at Johnny Thunder. "I'll go back to the ranch. I'll be safe enough there, because they won't know I've been here. Be careful, Johnny."

"I'll be careful," Johnny said, going with her to the door and opening it. "I'll be seein' you again. So long."

She touched his hand, and vanished quickly into the gathering twilight shadows. Johnny closed the door. The sheriff said, "Come here, younker."

Johnny crossed to the bed. The wounded lawman took the badge from his bloody shirt and pinned it on Johnny Thunder's coat.

Durant said softly, "You want yore gold back, and we both want to live. Somewhere out yonder are three wolves that need to be in a cell—or in boothill!"

Johnny Thunder looked at the badge, feeling a faint irony at its being there. He said, "All right—"

Jan McKay's scream cut dimly through the night's tumult, faint as a whisper on a far wind. Johnny Thunder wheeled from the bed, already reaching for his gun.

He heard the window pane shatter, and in the sweep of his eyes as he wheeled he saw a gun-barrel rake the curtain aside and ram itself through the opening, leveling on Sheriff Sam Durant. Behind that gun he saw a snarling, feline face.

Completing his swift, smooth draw, Johnny Thunder hammered three blazing, roaring shots through the window.

## CHAPTER VI

### *Red on the Snow*

THAT gun and the weasel face vanished as if a huge red hand had wiped them away.

Johnny Thunder wheeled again and ran at the door, giving no heed to Durant's warning cry: "Careful, younker, the others may be out there!" He tore open the door and lunged out, gun in hand, circling the cabin to the shattered window.

A still, grotesquely sprawled body lay in the snow under the window. Johnny cat-footed up to it and saw that it was the traitorous deputy, Joe Badger. Badger stirred, moaning faintly. Johnny stooped over him, heard his whining whispers:

"Get a sawbones, kid—I'm dyin'!"

"Die, then!" Johnny said harshly. "Where's Jan McKay?"

The dying man's d i m m i n g mind seemed to put his thoughts into words: "Told 'em—we oughta make sure—old puma was dead. Trailed his hoss back here. Knows it was me that shot him—got to shut his mouth—"

Johnny was looking wildly about in search of Jan. The barn doors gaped open. No living thing was in sight.

"A sawbones, kid—" Badger moaned.

"Where's Jan?" Johnny ground out. "Where're Cormant and Jory?"

Full, bitter knowledge of what he faced was on Badger's thin pale face there in the long shadows. He saw no pity on Johnny Thunder's hawkish face, only a wicked anger and a vast impatience.

Badger said bitterly, "Russ and Ben grabbed the girl when she had saddled her pony. They know they're through here, they're pullin' out. Russ wanted to kill the girl, but Ben aims to take her with him—to Mexico. They headed—toward Cross L—"

Badger's voice dribbled away; he lay still there in the snow and he wouldn't ever move until somebody moved him.

Johnny Thunder had wheeled back to the front of the house. Durant's horse had drifted over close to the cabin and stood with its rump to the wall. Johnny leaped into the saddle, drumming the big dun's flanks with his moccasined heels, swinging the startled beast in a circle as it drove away from the cabin.

He had reloaded his gun and now he jammed it back under his sheepskin. He found the north trail and raced along it, straining his eyes through the eerie blue twilight. Snow still fell steadily and the wind was a wild thing that tore at him with icy talons.

His lost gold didn't seem so important now. All he wanted was Jan McKay's safety, and she was somewhere there

ahead of him in deadly peril. He goaded the running horse with his heels and his bitter voice, trying to reach out with his eyes.

It might have been fifteen minutes, or twice that, when he saw the dim shape of a horse on the trail before him. The horse stood motionless, with empty saddle.

Then he saw another horse, with a rider, to one side of the trail. It was Russ Cormant. Cormant was pushing his horse through drifted snow toward a dark line of timber fifty yards away. He heard Cormant shout something into the wind.

Johnny's desperate eyes speared on past Cormant. And there, halfway between the trail and the timber, he saw Jan McKay. She was struggling frantically through the deep snow in a wild effort to reach the screening timber.

Ben Jory was after her. Jory had spurred his horse up close to the running girl, and now he suddenly left the saddle in a flying leap that carried him to the snow only a few feet behind Jan McKay.

Johnny saw her frightened face, a white splash in the windy gloom as she flung a glance back over her shoulder at Jory. He saw her stumble and tumble headlong into the snow. As she fought to her feet, Jory reached out and grabbed her.

Suddenly Russ Cormant, somehow warned, twisted in the saddle and saw Johnny Thunder driving straight at him. His warning yell lifted, and as he raised his arm Johnny knew that Cormant had been holding a gun in his hand.

He twisted sideways in the saddle, hearing the wicked hiss of Cormant's bullet and the flat echoes of his gun. He fired, racing full-tilt, his mind on the two figures beyond Cormant.

Cormant swayed in the saddle, a wild look of surprise and shock on his brutal face, but he didn't fall. He caught at the saddlehorn and raised his gun again, trying to line it on that charging figure. It seemed forever before he fired again, and again missed.

Johnny Thunder raced past him, not ten feet away, and as he flashed by he chopped his gun sideways and drove a shot full at Cormant. He saw Cormant's thick body jerk, saw Cormant's steel-trap mouth fly wide open—and then he was past Cormant, slamming straight at Ben Jory and the girl.

JORY was aware of Johnny now. He had Jan's arms pinned behind her, he had swung about so that she was a shield between him and Johnny Thunder. Jan was struggling furiously, kicking at Jory's legs.

Jory had a gun in his hand, and through the snow Johnny could see his dark face over Jan's shoulder, as poisonously wicked as a man's face could be.

Jory yelled above the wind, "Stay back, kid! Ride out of here or I'll kill this girl!"

"She'd be better dead than with you!" Johnny spat, and drove the dun through the snow.

Jory cursed savagely. His gun blazed and Johnny felt the burn of the bullet across his cheek. He held his fire, not daring to risk a shot yet. Forty feet separated them—thirty—

Jory's gun leveled again deliberately, his arm thrust between Jan's arm and her body. Johnny saw Jan's head dip, saw her fasten her teeth in Jory's wrist. Jory yelled with pain and surprise, and the gun blasted into the snow.

Jan held on like a bulldog with her teeth. Jory turned loose on her with his other arm, mauling his free fist at her head. Free of that arm, she twisted wildly aside and fell into the snow.

Johnny Thunder's gun blasted, and blasted again, driving another bullet into Ben Jory's body as the dark killer whirled completely about and fell face down in the snow.

Johnny leaped from the saddle, flinging a backward glance over his shoulder. Cormant's horse stood with empty saddle, while beside it lay a dark something over which snow was drifting.

Jory lay motionless in the snow in the way a dead man lies.

Jan had struggled to her feet and was wiping snow from her eyes. She had heard the gunfire but had been unable to see the result, and terror was a wild dark thing in her eyes until she saw Johnny Thunder coming toward her.

"Did—are you all right, Johnny?" she called.

"I'm all right," Johnny Thunder said, and wasn't at all surprised when she walked straight into his arms. He added:

"Everything's all right, from now on."

And both of them, standing there very close in the snow-filled twilight of this wintry day, were somehow quite certain that it would be so.

# The Cowboy HAD A WORD for it

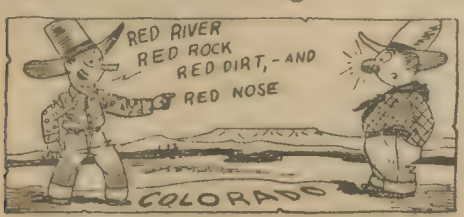
by CHUCK STANLEY

WINTER had closed in around the C Bar S by the time the old "mavericker" and the young tenderfoot had another chance to get together to discuss the lingo of the range rider, and how it had gone a long way to influence the place names in the State of Colorado. The afternoon had been spent in forking hay and feed out for the cattle still on the range, and in bringing straw to the horses in the corral adjoining the big barn.

Now the pair were in the "old-timer's" cabin with the "pot-bellied" stove heated to a cherry red and with snow-wet clothing hanging from a line. The "mossy-horn" was spreading out a map of Colorado and tacking it to the floor with two pairs of old boots. He managed to kneel down alongside of it while his "Arbuckle" company settled down on his hunkers with his notebook open and his ears pricked up.

## The Naming of a State

"I don't know whether you realize it or not, 'younker'," said the old "mossback," "but Colorado is one of them states that had plenty of kicking around when it came to hooking a name onto




the Territory and making it stick through when the area became a state. Like we know from our discussion of the river down in Arizona and Utah, 'Colorado' was the Spanish name meaning red. There's plenty of that color in the state, what with the river and the rocks and the dirt, but that wasn't the only thing that influenced the naming of the state."

"I know something about that," the pilgrim replied. "First off they wanted to name the place Colona, which was the Spanish version of the name of Christopher Columbus. I don't reckon most people figured that Columbus ever cared much about Colorado, so they changed their mind on that. Then there was a group who felt it might be a good idea to name the territory Jefferson, after Thomas Jefferson, the president who put through the deal for the Louisiana Purchase of which this was a part."

"That was the start," the old-timer declared, "but before them folks in the territory and their representatives in Congress got through wrangling and pawing and tossing their horns there were at least a dozen other names that came popping up. One of them was Osage, after the Indian tribe that did a heap of trekking and buffalo hunting around the area. Senator Green of Missouri was the first hombre who figured it would be a good idea to call the place the Territory of Colorado, and that was back in 1859."

## "Idahoe"

The two in the winter-swept cabin then talked about other names that had come up and briefly referred to the Territory that is now the state of Colorado. These included "Arapahoe" for

**Our Tenderfoot Learns Colorado Place-Names!**

the Indian tribe dwelling in the Pike's Peak area; "Idahoe" meaning the Gem of the Mountains; "Yampa" meaning the bear, because of the large number of those animals found in the area; "San Juan" to honor one of the patron saints of the Spanish settlers; "Tahosa" meaning Dwellers of the Mountain, and several others such as "Lafayette" and "Franklin." Those who were sponsoring the name of "Idahoe" for Colorado were lucky to be able to get another opportunity to tack it onto a state some years later.

We have already mentioned Pike's Peak, which is one of the most outstanding landmarks in Colorado, and it is quite well known that this mountain gained its name from the explorer Zebulon Pike.

The "greener's" notebook was filling up with other names that had been given to locations in Colorado as gestures of honor for men who had made history either in the Government or in the opening of the West.

There were such well known Colorado Counties as "Kit Carson" named after the famous scout; "Lincoln" named after the martyred president of the United States; "Fremont" named after John C. Fremont the pioneer in California and later a Territorial Governor in the Southwest; "Washington" named after George Washington; "Jackson" in honor of Old Hickory, the victor at New Orleans; Garfield, named after another martyred president, James A. Garfield.

## Presidents and Patron Saints

"They sure took care of the Presidents, didn't they?" the "younker" said with a chuckle. The old-timer nodded. Then while he moved his cold pipe from one corner of his mouth to the other, he jabbed a spur at the map on the floor and remarked:

"While the Americans were going after the Presidents, the Spanish settlers liked to name things in honor of their patron saints, and other things with which they were most familiar. That accounts for the names of San Juan and San Miguel counties, named after St. John and St. Michael. The Aztecs got a little attention when they named Montezuma county down in the southwestern part of the state and the Indians are remembered in Cheyenne County, Kiowa County, Yuma County and Arapahoe County."

"I savvy all that," remarked the young chronicler as he jotted down his information, but it seems to me that the Spaniards went a long way toward complicating things out in the West."

"How was that?" asked the old-timer as he looked up with a puzzled expression on his face.

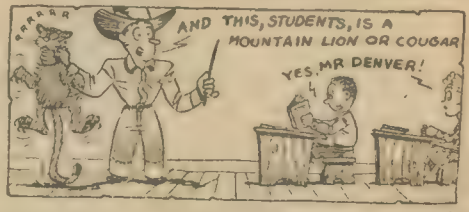
"Well," laughed the "younker," "they got sort of repetitious, you might say. We've more or less expected to see places like El Paso and Rio Grande down in Texas, but if you take a squint at your map, you'll find that they're up in Colorado, too."

## Colorado, and No Mistake

"There's no argument about that," declared the "mossy-horn," "but there's one city that's typically Colorado, and no mistake. And the fellow who's name it carries was one of the heroes of the West who doesn't often get his name into print. The city is Denver, Colorado, and the man was James William Denver."

The youth paused after he had made the note and looked up at the browned and bent wrangler, expecting to hear more details about the man who had given his name to Colorado's capital city. The old-timer did not disappoint him.

"James William Denver was quite a hombre," he declared. "He was born on a farm in Virginia right after the War of 1812, and like George Washington




that other famous Virginian, he gained considerable fame as a surveyor, schoolteacher and frontiersman. To show that he was also equipped for life out in a great open space like the West, he also did a bit of law-booking, and held down a job as a small-town editor."

The "greener" was making notes rapidly, and the old "mossy-horn" went on.

## A Fighting Man

"Most folks think because Denver started out as a school-teacher and a lawyer that he wasn't any great shakes

as a fighting man, but that don't follow. He was a man well over six-feet-two, with broad shoulders and plenty of muscle. When the Mexican War was stirring things up, Denver recruited an infantry outfit, had himself commissioned as captain, and ran his riflemen all the way from Vera Cruz to Mexico City."

"That sure sounds like he was a rooting-tooting fellow," declared the youngster.

The old mentor nodded, and chuckled as he said:

"You ain't heard much of anything yet. Denver was one of the stout hearts who made the run into the California gold fields, and after showing his skill in handling tough jobs in that turbulent area he was named to Congress. As Governor of the Kansas Territory he ruled over an area that extended out into the Rocky Mountains and included the new Pike's Peak mineral area.

"Denver didn't give up his fighting with his successful forays against the Kansas guerillas. He was later Commissioner of Indian Affairs and a general in the Civil War. Denver can be proud of its namesake."

## Other Men, Other Cities

With this information recorded, the young tenderfoot was curious about men who had given their names to other cities in Colorado.

"There were a good many of them," the oldster declared, "too many to try and include all of them in this discussion. We've already met up with Ogden, when we discussed Ogden, Utah. He was one of the mountain men who went out into the mountain country for the Beaver trapping with Jim Bridger and Jedediah Smith. His name has been given to a place in Colorado. Logan County and the city of the same name were honoring General Logan who was a corps commander in the Civil War."

"What about the mining areas?" broke in our chronicler. "Didn't they give plenty of colorful names to this part of the West?"

"You bet," agreed the oldster. Then he went ahead to outline a number of places including La Plata, a city and county meaning "Silver City" and "Silver County"; Telluride which recalled one of the important elements found in the mining districts; Anthracite and Carbondale which while in Colorado reminded our Easterner of similar spots in the coal fields of Pennsylvania. Silver Creek and Coal Cliff were also demonstrative of the thoughts in the minds of the settlers.

"There are plenty of natural resources in the state that have also cropped up in the naming of places," pointed out the

"mossy-horn." "Like you may know, there are such spots as Sulphur, Hot Springs, Hot Sulphur Springs, Juniper Springs, Oak Creek, Trout Creek among others to describe familiar sights and scenes."

## Names from the East

The records on Colorado were going down into the worn notebook at a great rate when the tenderfoot chronicler broke in with a question.

"Is it true that Colorado is one of those states in the Union that carries a great number of place names that were brought along by the settlers from their original homes in the East?"

"It sure is," agreed his mentor. "All you have to do is take this here spur pointer of mine and run it over the map. You'll find plenty of town names that remind you of places as far East as Virginia and New England, and in the Middle West like Illinois, Missouri and other neighboring states."

The youngster knelt down and took the spur while the old-timer stuffed some cut plug into his pipe, scratched a match on his bootheel and lighted up. The familiar "old home towns" that cropped up in Colorado to recall other earlier homes included such places as Sedalia, Walden, Gary, Akron, Breckenridge, Georgetown, Jamestown, Alamo, Tennessee, Englewood and countless others.

"You're right there," laughed the oldster as the companion of the evening repeated the names he found on the colorful map. "And there were a heap of those folks who came to Colorado after trekking clear across the Atlantic Ocean from Europe. They didn't forget their old home towns, either. You'll find that

Colorado has such spots as Genoa, Westminster, Hanover, Buckingham, Wellington, Bristol and similar spots."

A discussion of the types of people who settled these areas was interesting, but the tenderfoot was particularly interested in towns whose names showed something of the settlers' feelings regarding the prospects for the future. He discovered that some of them showed an optimistic approach to the future, while others must have been named by cowboys, miners, ranchers and settlers who had tried and failed.

Among the more curious and descriptive of these names were Bountiful, Eden, Ideal, Amity, and others. Among the more unusual and yet simple names was Firstview at the headwaters of the Smoky Hill River, Wagon Wheel Pass or Wagon Wheel Gap on the upper Rio Grande River, Black Canyon on the Gunnison, the Rabbit Ears Range, etc.

"Didn't the Pacific or Asia contribute anything to the place names of Colorado?" asked the younker, more as a joke than because he thought there might be any promise in this suggestion.

The "mossy-horn" cocked his ear to one side, looked up at several things he had drying on the rafters of his little cabin, then replied:

"It might be, son, it might be. I recall a place named Pagoda up in the northwestern corner of the state, then there's Orient down in the south, and like as not there's a heap of others scattered here and there. But when it came to naming rivers, mountains and other spots like that, them waddies who rode the mountain trails in Colorado went in for sort of simple things. They hooked the names of animals onto things, or picked up the handiest association."

The younker was interested in these references, and poised a pencil to jot them down. The old timer began running them off on his fingers and included Cross Mountain, Cathedral Bluffs, Pinnacle, Pyramid, Elk Head Mountains, Eagle River, Deer Run, Sand Dunes, Twin Lakes, Wild Horse, Lone Oak, Log Cabin and Coppertown.

## Romeo and Juliet

"There were also a heap of folks coming out into that country who liked to show that they knew something about literature and the men in the European countries and the United States who wrote it. That's why we find a spot called Romeo named after Romeo and Juliet. Then there is Hugo named after Victor Hugo. Greeley reminds us of the famous Horace Greeley who is supposed to have sent most of the young tenderfoots to the West. Then there is the town of Kazan. Some folks claim that Curwood named his famous character after the town; while others believe the town was named after the dog. So you can take your pick."

The tenderfoot chuckled. Then mindful of the information he had turned up concerning other states, he asked:

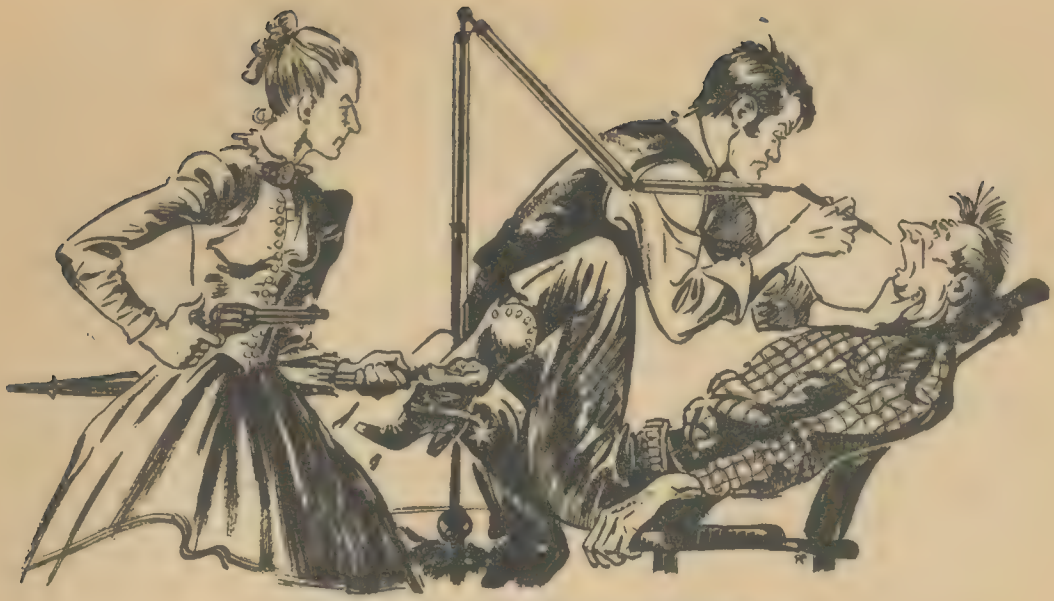
"How about girl's names in Colorado?"

"There are quite a few of them scattered over the rocky ups and downs," the old-timer agreed. "Some of them come to mind immediately. Others you can spot with that spur pointer you're rolling over the map. I don't reckon you'll have much trouble locating spots like Mildred, Mount Pearl, Augusta, Dolores, Columbine, Virginia Dale, and Elizabeth."

Things were quieting outside and the oil in the lamp in the bracket above them was burning out. But the two range lingo investigators added several of the Indian and Mexican names to their Colo-

rado notes before calling it a night. One place was Mosca, the Spanish word for mosquito; another was Mesa Verde, the Green Mesa; then there was Wigwam and Ute Peak. But the most famous of all contributions was the name given to the range of mountains in south central Colorado, the famous Sangre de Cristo or Blood of Christ Range.

The old "mossy-horn" knocked the dottle out of his pipe and into his hand. Things were quiet around the C Bar S. This was a signal to suspend discussion for this session. But some real nuggets had been added to the store of lore on the cowboy and mining country. The "Arbuckle" was grateful for them and thanked the oldster even as he was looking forward to another "chin-wagging" session on the subject of place-names in Oklahoma or Kansas.



"A drill can be mighty painful," said Doc Philpot

# A PAINFUL EXTRACTION

## By NORMAN N. TOLKAN

*Phinius P. Philpot finds that catching a bank robber is like pulling teeth — or, in some instances, vice versa!*

IT HAPPENED that at three A.M. on a Tuesday morning early in May, Phinius P. Philpot, D.D.S., was suffering from one of his acute insomnia attacks. The doc found that the only way to relieve his misery was to climb out of bed and shuffle to the window upon whose sill he kept his omnipresent bottle of medicinal alcohol and a shot glass.

Doc Philpot was in the process of pouring some of this magic potion when he chanced to glance through the dusty pane. Since his office and sleeping quarters were directly opposite the Cranbury Cattleman's Bank and Loan Building, it was only natural that he should see in the light of one flickering street lamp, the shadowy figure who was at that moment making his surreptitious exit from that institution's alley window, heavily burdened under a bulging gunny sack.

Blinking to make sure he was fully awake, but failing to convince himself, the doc watched the lone hombre walk quickly to a white-stockinged bay bronc, drape and tie the gunny sack in front of the big-horned charro saddle, mount unhurriedly, and jog quietly out of Cranbury.

"I'll be dogged," the doc said to himself," if this ain't a funny hour to be carting away garbage." So thinking, the doc gulped down his whisky and stumbled back to his couch to fall almost instantly into a deep slumber and dream that a hundred little pink men with purple feet were dancing on his chest, and that everyone of them was carrying a gunny sack filled with garbage.

The next morning when the good dentist descended the rickety flight of steps which led from his office, and entered on the main street of Cranbury, he discovered that the citizens of that

somnolent town were in a veritable tizzy.

A crowd was milling nervously in front of the Cattleman's Bank and Loan Building like a proddy herd of Herefords before a storm. Doc Philpot questioned Sarah Stokes, a slightly prunish old maid of some forty years who had often tried to divert the doc from his sinful primrose path that involved the imbibing of *spiritus fermentei.* Miss Stokes was shading herself from the sun with a heavy, ivory-handled parasol.

"Howdy, Miss Stokes," the doc greeted her cheerfully. "What's all the to-do about?"

"Where you been, Phinius, you old rumpot?" sniffed the maidenly Miss Stokes, friendly-like. "The bank was cleaned out like a scoured fry pan some time las' night."

THE dentist's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Philpot, if you please, Miss Stokes," he said. "And is that so! How much did he get?"

"Sheriff Simms says the *he* was *they,* and don't you get persnickety with me, Phinius, I've known you a long time. Them blasted bandits ran off with nigh onto twenty thousand pesos. Just about every cent there was in the place. What's us poor depositors goin' to do? I want my money," Miss Stokes wailed. "And I'm camping right here till I get it."

"You just do that, Miss Stokes. Good day." Ignoring the further cries of anguish issuing from the bereaved virgin, Philpot made his way down the block to the local den of iniquity, Finn's Harddrink Harem.

Finn looked up from his bar mopping and saw the doc. Without being asked Finn poured a shot of rye. He and the doc performed this ritual every morning, since the dentist substituted rye for orange juice in his daily wake-up routine.

"What's all this about a bank robbery?" asked the doc, after he'd downed his drink.

"The sheriff is out lookin' for the gents what done the dirt right now, along with some of the boys. Banker D'Argent found the place emptied when he got down there this mornin'. The depositors has got D'Argent mighty worried. They want their money and if he can't get it up, why I figger they'll come close to lynching him, pore feller. Never had no use for banks myself. Plenty better places to put yore dinero, I say."

Doc Philpot was having his second eye-opener when the sheriff and his posse thundered into town and tied up in front of the Harem. A moment later they were clomping inside to get the trail dust out of their throats.

"Did yuh get 'em?" Finn demanded, as Sheriff Leroy Simms stomped up to the mahogany, a look of deep sorrow in his bloodshot eyes.

"None of yore danged business," Simms snarled, coyotelike.

"Keep a civil tongue in yore pasty face, yuh servant of the people, or yuh'll be gettin' no whiskey in here!" Finn bellowed. The sheriff wilted perceptibly.

"Well," grumbled the sheriff contritely, "they left town on Division Street and then cut into the main road to Leesville. Their marks is mixed with those of a hundred horses and wagons. Couldn't trail 'em nohow."

"Tch, tch," Finn tongued, filling glasses for possemen and Simms.

Doc Philpot wiggled the sheriff's elbow just as he was getting the drink up to his face. Most of the whiskey ran down into his beard.

"Simms," said the dentist, "I'd like a word with you in private.

Cursing, Sheriff Leroy Simms followed Philpot into an unpopulated corner of the barroom. "Well, speak up, yuh runty tooth-puller," he said, wiping his beard with a red bandana.

The dentist recounted exactly what he had seen transpire the previous night. "It was just one gent, sheriff. I seen him plain."

Simms sniffed, getting a snootful of Doc Philpot's whiskey loaded breath. "Yuh were either drunk or sleepin' and probably both," said he. "I don't believe a word of it." And so saying, he turned back to the bar.

The doc shrugged and went out into the sun.

Most of the crowd had left the street in front of the bank. Even people worried about their money could not long stand the burning glance of that orange ball. But then the doc saw Miss Sarah Stokes seated on a camp stool in the shade of the alley under her parasol. The dentist nodded politely, then shuffled slowly back to his office.

Pausing a few feet from the foot of the stairs leading to his abode, the doc

surveyed his only advertising. On one of the two windows facing the street Philpot had a shade of bilious green and on that blind was painted: Phinius P. Philpot—PAINLESS DENTIST—Extractions A Specialty.

Inside the cool office, the doc placed a sign on the window ledge in front of the shade. OPEN FOR BUSINESS, was what it read. Then the doc settled himself in his ancient dentist's chair to await the arrival of his patients, if any. Doc Philpot didn't have many clients. Most folks in Cranbury were afraid the doc wasn't as painless as he claimed and often preferred to suffer the toothache rather than submit to Doc Philpot's alcoholic ministrations. But the good dentist got enough business to keep him in whisky so he didn't complain.

PHILPOT was whistling tunelessly when he saw a tall jasper ride into town on a white-stockinged bay. There was something familiar about the horse and rider that brought an extra wrinkle of thought to the doc's already plowed forehead. But he couldn't put his finger on what it was.

The tall gent reined up in front of Doc Philpot's office and sat his saddle gazing longingly and fearfully at the sign painted on the doc's green window shade. The rider tied up his bronc after long deliberation, and holding a hand against his jaw, disappeared into Doc Philpot's building. The doc heard him clumping up the stairs and figured he was about to have himself a customer.

Doc Philpot jumped out of his chair, ran a hand through his hair, rubbed his bulbous nose, and waited on his patient.

The door swung open. "Are we alone?" the big jasper demanded.

"You have the honor of being my first vic—I mean patient today," the doc said. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"The trouble is with this here danged molar," said the tall man, opening his mouth and poking at the inflamed tooth with his right forefinger.

"How did you happen to favor me with your custom?" the doc asked. "You're a stranger in town, are you not?"

"I shore am, Doc," said the tall man. "But I staged through this burg on my way to Leesville las' week and I seen there was a dentist here then. Ain't many of you fellers around this neck of the woods and I come all the way from Leesville to have this tooth treated. It's drivin' me clean out of my noodle."

The doc nodded his head sympathetically, but when he set his eyes on the jasper's six-gun, a nervous chill chased goosebumps up and down his spine.

"Right nice horse you have," said Philpot. "Seems like I've seen him before, but I don't recall where."

"I come here to have yuh fix this tooth, not admire my bronc. And yuh ain't never seen him before—unless it was—"

"Don't be silly," the doc shouted. "I was asleep last night."

"What's that!" hollered the gent, and he yanked out his six-gun and leveled it at the doc. "So you did see me last night. Now ain't that too bad. I reckon I'll be takin' care of yuh after yuh fix my tooth. Yes sir, too bad."

"Oh my," moaned the doc. "Now I've done it."

"I don't want nobody comin' in while I'm here," said the outlaw. "Yuh better yank that 'open' sign out of the window."

"Yes, sir," said the dentist, eyeing the jasper's big pistol. "The 'closed' sign is in the other room. I'll get it." The doc stumbled into his windowless bedroom and ten seconds later emerged carrying a cardboard on which was painted in big blue letters: CLOSED.

After holding it for the owlhoot's inspection with a trembling hand, Philpot set it in the window in place of the OPEN sign.

"This shore better be painless," said the gent, stretching his long frame in the torture chair, "or yuh'll be dead before yuh think it's time." The outlaw patted the well-rubbed stock of his Colt significantly and set the gun in his lap.

"If you want it to be painless I'll have to give you a needle," the doc said, gazing at the outlaw mournfully. If he would only learn to keep quiet. Now he'd never get the chance, because he knew what the bank robber planned to do once the extraction was completed.

"If that's what makes it painless, then that's what I want," said the man with the gun.

The doc walked to his instrument cabinet, unhappily, and loaded a wicked looking needle with pain-killer. Returning to the chair, he pulled down the outlaw's lower gum and was about to plunge in the point when the big fellow grunted and jerked aside.

"Yuh ain't shovin' that thing into my

jaw," he bellowed.

"How in blazes do you expect me to kill the pain if you don't get the needle?"

"Well, put it someplace else," said the bank cleaner-outer.

A crafty gleam entered Doc Philpot's bleary eyes as he rolled up the gent's right shirt-sleeve and drove the needle into the fellow's shoulder muscle. He hollered in mortal agony.

"Closest spot to your mouth I can put it without injecting it where I always do. Probably won't be too effective, but it's better than nothing," the doc said to the crook. "Well, mister—heck I might as well call you by your Christian name, seeing as how yuh're the gent who's going to put mine on a tombstone."

"Megee. Ironman Megee. Any other questions?"

"Nope, Mr. Megee. Just relax now," said Doc Philpot, jamming his forceps into Ironman's mouth and grabbing the bad molar. Ironman moaned as the doc gave his tooth an experimental twist. Ironman's moan grew louder and louder as Philpot yanked and pulled on the stubborn molar. This continued for several minutes, while the tears flowed down Ironman's face.

"Tough customer," said the doc. "Guess I'll have to use the drill."

"What's wrong with the pain killer?" Megee demanded, sobbing. "I'm shore goin' to pay yuh back for this, yuh charlatan!"

"Tut, tut, my boy. It will all be over in a minute." The doc set his foot on the power pedal of the drill and began to pump it up and down, getting the drill-bit to whirling.

AT THAT moment the door burst open without warning and Sarah Stokes slammed into the office like a tornado, waving her heavy-handled parasol as if she were a knight with a lance about to do battle with a dragon.

"What's wrong, Phinius?" Sarah's swift glance took in the Colt on Megee's lap. Her feminine instinct was aroused. At all costs she knew she must protect this poor, misguided, silly man for whom she had such a warm affection.

Sarah raised her parasol and charged. Megee bellowed, enraged, but when he tried to go for his gun, he discovered that his right arm was numb from the shoulder down. He couldn't move it worth a darn. Sarah fetched Ironman a resounding blow on his noggin with her parasol, and he slumped in the chair.

"Well I declare," she said, breathlessly.

"Sarah, you're wonderful," Doc Philpot said, grabbing up Ironman's gun and covering him as the outlaw moved and opened one eye gingerly.

Sarah blushed a dark crimson and her mouth seemed to lose its prunish look at the doc's compliment. "What's wrong with his arm?" she asked.

"Just the nerve-deadener I gave him for his tooth," explained the doc. "It's his own fault, not letting me put it where it belonged. Some Ironman!"

"How the heck did this blasted woman get here?" Ironman demanded, fully conscious again. "Nobody knows who I am except you, yuh ring-tailed quack!"

"Tut tut," Philpot remonstrated. "But as to my summoning of Sarah, it was elementary, really. When you forced me to change the signs in the window from 'open' to 'closed', I merely printed 'help' on the back of the 'closed' sign when I got it from the bedroom, then hung it with the 'help' side showing, hoping someone might see it."

"I saw your plea, Phinius, dear," Sarah said coyly, "and came a-runnin'. But who the heck is this hombre?"

"He's Ironman Megee, the jasper who robbed the bank the last night. I saw him do it and tried to tell the sheriff, but Simms is a know-it-all and he wouldn't listen. Now, Sarah, if you'll keep him covered, I'll just use the drill to loosen his bad tooth before I finish extracting it. A drill can be mighty painful to someone who ain't got any nerve-deadener in their jaw. In fact, I think he might even be persuaded to tell us where he hid the dinero he stole."

Doc Philpot pumped the lever and started the bit to turning again. Ironman's eyes were big as half-dollars as he watched the doc bring the drill up to his mouth. He wanted to bolt, but there was a look of solid determination on the face of Sarah Stokes as she covered him unwaveringly with the big Colt. Ironman began to holler blue murder as the drill cut into his tooth.

Sarah sighed happily. Doc was quite a hero. If she could just get him to stop his drinking, Cranbury might see a wedding. Doc didn't observe the way she possessively appraised him. Doc was too intent on his drilling.

Ironman told.

A True Crime Story by LUTHER LOCKE

The two peace officers covered him with their Six-guns

# ONE was a MURDERER

*Old-time Deputy Sheriff Renningsdale puts his wits to work on a puzzling Southwest mystery!*

FOR five hours the blizzard had howled down from the Wasatch Mountains in Utah across northern Arizona, driving before it blinding snow. Already the trails were almost impassable. It was late afternoon and through the teeth of the gale a lone rider, clad in heavy clothing, urged his mount through the deep snow on the Winslow-Flagstaff stage route.

Gregory Hoyt had ridden out of Winslow that forenoon expecting to reach his uncle's tavern, The Halfway House, before the blow reached its full intensity. He knew the swiftness with which an Arizona blizzard could strike, so he

gave his horse its head and hoped they would make it before both became exhausted.

An hour later the horseman sighted the tavern. Dismounting, Hoyt unsaddled and fed the sorrel, then made his way to the building where he was met by his uncle, Ben Renningsdale.

"Ma and I were beginning to worry," the grizzled operator of Halfway House said. "Thought maybe you'd decided not to try it today."

"You don't have to worry about me Uncle Ben," the youth replied. "But this is a bad one. The way it looks now I wouldn't have got back for a couple of days."

## Women Join Men

The two men were joined in the warm, cheery kitchen by Mrs. Renningsdale and their daughter, Emily. The older woman shivered at the eerie shriek of the wind as she prepared the evening meal.

Ben Renningsdale was a deputy sheriff, and the day before had sent his nephew, Hoyt, to Winslow with a report for Sheriff Tom Bagley. Nothing much had happened in the vicinity of Halfway House during the past two weeks.

In the living room of the tavern the two men seated themselves in front of the fireplace.

"Tom have anything to tell me?" Ben asked.

"Yeah," his nephew replied. "Old Joe Dobson, up in San Francisco Wash, was murdered and robbed. Bagley said the bandit had got away on Joe's roan and said to tell you to be on the lookout for a stranger on a roan."

The words hardly were out of the youth's mouth when there came the sound of someone's voice through the whistling of the wind.

"Hi, there!"

## Another Guest Arrives

Quickly Ben Renningsdale opened the front door and saw a rider leading his horse.

"Bad night out," the rider said. "Can a traveler get some grub and a place to sleep here?"

"Sure can," Renningsdale replied. "Stable your mount around back and come in. The lad will show you."

Hoyt slipped into his coat and went out. Five minutes later he burst into the kitchen and beckoned to Ben.

"He's riding a roan," he said in a low voice.

Before he could say more the stranger came in. He was a man in his forties, deeply bronzed by sun and garbed in woolen shirt, blue dungarees tucked into the tops of short boots, cowman's hat and a heavy leather coat. As he slipped out of the coat, the two men saw he wore a gun strapped high above his left hip. He said his name was Jack Brady.

They talked for a few minutes. The stranger had come from Flagstaff and had expected to make Winslow before night, but the storm had slowed him down.

Renningsdale and his nephew glanced at each other but said nothing, except to encourage the man to talk, but other than being interested in the prospect of a hot meal, he was uncommunicative.

## Visitors Eat Supper

Presently Mrs. Renningsdale summoned them to the dining room for supper. Old Ben had not mentioned to his wife and daughter about the message Hoyt had brought from the sheriff, as he did not want to worry them. After all, he reasoned, there were many men riding roans in that part of the country.

The five people were in the midst of the meal when there came another loud knocking on the door. Again Ben answered. This time it was a much younger man seeking shelter from the strom. He was directed to the stable and, in a few minutes, returned to the house. A young man in his twenties, he remarked about the blow, said he was headed for Phoenix and had expected to reach Flagstaff, but decided to put up at the Halfway House until the storm abated.

He, too, was in range garb. He said he was a cowhand and had been working on a ranch near Albuquerque in New Mexico. He appeared to be unarmed. But Renningsdale thought the fellow was shifty-eyed and when he talked he didn't seem to know much about the country.

"My name's Frank Nielson," he announced.

## Story Mystifies Renningsdale

After supper the four men went into the big room while the two women started to wash the dishes. Brady was less communicative than before, but the

younger man, Nielson, grew loquatious. He said he was on his way to Phoenix where he was going to visit an uncle and aunt. Old Ben wondered why he was on his way to Flagstaff instead of taking the direct route south from Winslow.

While his uncle was talking to Neilson, Hoyt slipped out to the stable where he examined Nielson's horse. The animal was a gray mare.

About ten o'clock Mrs. Renningsdale came in to tell the two guests their rooms were ready. She looked out the window and remarked:

"For Heaven's sake, Ben! Here comes another one."

It wasn't unusual for Halfway House to have a number of guests a night, but on a night such as this Renningsdale hardly had expected so many riders to be abroad. He hurried to the door, wondering why three men should be braving one of the worst blizzards in his long memory.

## Also Rides Roan

The third rider also was young, about the same age as Neilson and, as Ben led the way to the stable, he noticed in the lantern light the horse was a roan. Ben watched and thought. A murder committed fifty miles away. The murderer had escaped on a stolen roan. Now three strangers had sought shelter from the storm at his tavern, two of them riding roans. All three horses showed evidence of hard riding and the three riders had started out in the teeth of the storm no sensible men would have braved.

Ben was roused from his meditation by the voice of the stranger.

"My name's Kent," he said, "Bill Kent, cowhand from Texas."

Renningsdale looked his new guest over critically. He thought he looked a little too pale for a man who rode the ranges of the Panhandle. His clothes had a look about them that didn't suggest a native Westerner.

Inside Renningsdale said: "Ma, can we find something hot for our guest to eat and fix him up a room?"

## Introduces Third Guest

When they entered the big living room, Ben introduced this man to the others. Brady, silent and preoccupied merely nodded and said curtly: "Howdy."

But Nielson faced Kent and said, "Bad night out stranger." He looked at Renningsdale. "Guess I'll turn in."

His host produced an oil lamp from the kitchen and led the way up the stairs to the second floor of the tavern. They were followed by Brady who said he would go to bed, also. Nielson was shown to a room at the head of the stairs and Ben led Brady down the hall to a room at one end of the building. The men said good night and closed their doors. Emily started making the bed in another room, between those of Brady and Nielson, for the latest arrival, Kent.

While Kent was eating, Renningsdale talked quietly to Hoyt, discussing whether it was merely coincidence that two of the men, Brady and Kent, were riding roans. They both realized the murderer, who had escaped on a roan, easily could have disposed of his stolen mount by this time and found another.

## Kent Asks for Bed

Their talk was interrupted by Kent who said he wanted to turn in so he could get an early start in the morning. A few minutes later the Halfway House was quiet and in darkness.

Renningsdale had been asleep but a short time when he was awakened by a gunshot. Lighting a lamp he learned the time was just midnight. He had been asleep a little more than an hour. Quickly he arose and carrying the lamp went into the living room. There he was met by Hoyt, also carrying a lamp.

"Did you hear that shot, Uncle Ben?"

They heard footsteps upstairs now. Ben opened the door to the stairway. "What's wrong up there?"

It was Brady who answered. "There was a shot in the room next to mine. You better come up."

Brady, clothed only in his underwear, stood at the top of the stairs waiting for them. "The shot was in that room," he said, pointing to Kent's chamber.

## Shot Alarms Everyone

At this moment, the door to Nielson's room opened and the young man, sleepy and rubbing his eyes, asked:

"Was that a shot that woke me up?"

Accompanied by Brady, Nielson and Hoyt, Ben opened the door to Kent's room. Instantly in the dim light of the kerosene lamp the four men saw what had happened. On the bed, fully clothed, lay Bill Kent, with a gaping

wound in his head and his gun clutched in his right hand. He was dead.

"Wonder why he shot himself," Brady said.

Nielson answered, "He acted queer to me when he came in."

The noise and excitement had aroused Mrs. Renningsdale and Emily who now were outside the room.

"What happened, Ben?" they asked.

Renningsdale told the women to stay out. One of their guests had committed suicide, he thought, and it would be better if they didn't come in just yet.

Hoyt, an expression of fear on his face, stared at his uncle.

## Deputy Investigates

Handing the lamp to Brady, the grizzled old deputy examined the dead man. His gun had been fired once. The bullet had entered the skull above the right temple. Pulling a sheet over the dead man, Renningsdale saw the man's coat hanging over the back of a nearby chair. In a wallet he found a ten-dollar bill, some silver and a couple of letters. There was nothing else. The letters were addressed to "William Kent, Tombstone, Arizona."

As the others watched, Ben stepped back. "Guess he shot himself, all right. But I'll have to notify the sheriff and you fellows must stay here until he arrives."

He turned to Hoyt. "Get the snow shoes out, go to Winslow, and tell Bagley to get here as soon as he can. Better not try a horse in this deep snow."

In the lower room Nielson appeared to be annoyed at the prospect of being delayed at Halfway House while Brady announced that he had to be on his way at daylight.

"Sorry, mister," Ben told him, "You'll have to stay put till Tom shows up. It happens I'm a deputy sheriff and, if you make any fuss about it, I'll have to put you under arrest."

He flashed his badge.

## Brady Becomes Resigned

Brady shrugged, and appeared to be resigned. Nielson laughed, sat down in a big chair and went to sleep. Renningsdale took a heavy belt and holstered gun from the wall and strapped it on him. Then turning to Hoyt, who was ready to leave for Winslow, said: "The storm is about blown out. You both should be back here by mid-afternoon."

Throughout the remainder of the night Ben Renningsdale kept watch, determined that neither of his two guests should leave before the sheriff arrived.

While waiting, Renningsdale was busy with his own thoughts. He had noticed several things. In the first place, there were no powder burns on the dead man's head and if he had shot himself, there certainly would have been. For another thing, he thought the bullet had entered the man's head too high and at an angle impossible, to be self inflicted. Then there was something unnatural about the way Kent's dead hand had held the gun.

Ben had seen many a dead outlaw in his day still grasping his weapon, and this seemed different to him. Also, if Kent had been bent on suicide, why should he have come to the tavern in the first place, instead of turning his horse loose and putting a bullet in his brain out there on the trail?

## Deputy's Suspicions Grow

As the hours passed, Ben felt more and more certain either Brady or Nielson had killed Kent. He remembered the flash of recognition on Nielson's face when Kent came in, and also the strange reticence that came over Brady at the same time. Could it be these three men knew each other and there was some kind of deadly feud between them? Did any or all of them know about the murder of Joe Dobson?

He remembered that both Brady and Kent were riding roan horses when they arrived.

Dawn finally broke. Mrs. Renningsdale and her daughter prepared breakfast for Ben and his prisoners. There was little talk at the table.

## Tension Increases

As the day wore on, dinner was eaten. The three men became more nervous and watched every move made by any of the others. Brady grew more sullen and impatient, and twice Renningsdale had to caution him about his language when the women were near enough to hear. Nielson became extremely nervous, especially when Emily, at the insistence of her mother, remained in the kitchen and refused to talk to him.

And Ben, grim and watchful, fought off a drowsiness that he was fearful would overcome him unless Hoyt and

Sheriff Bagley returned very soon.

Meanwhile, Hoyt had reached Winslow and found Sheriff Bagley, to whom he explained all the circumstances.

## Men Start for Tavern

The storm was past now. Hoyt and Bagley, both on snowshoes because the drifts were too deep for horses to plow through, started back for Halfway House. As they swung along with the familiar swish, swish of the snowshoes sounding noisily in the silence of the trail, Bagley told the youth about the murder of Dobson. Someone had ambushed Dobson in his cabin in the lonely wash, and stolen several hundred dollars the old prospector had concealed.

The murderer then had left his own spent horse, which was found several miles away, and stolen old Joe's roan, a young and fast animal. Someone had seen a stranger on a roan heading in the direction of Flagstaff.

Bagley and a posse had taken up the chase, but the criminal had too long a start and his trail soon was lost in the desert. The sheriff also mentioned he had lost his hat, one of his favorites, while chasing the stray horse.

## The Sheriff Takes Charge

Late that afternoon, the sheriff and Hoyt, tired from their long mushing over the drifted snow, arrived at the Renningsdale tavern. While they rested, and drank steaming hot coffee, Sheriff Bagley listened to the story of the death of Bill Kent from Ben.

Brady and Nielson left no doubt in the sheriff's mind that they wanted to get across the idea it was a suicide. Presently they all went up to the room where the dead man's body still lay on the bed.

Renningsdale had not told the sheriff of his suspicions, for he wanted Bagley to see for himself before he put any ideas in his head. Neither had he uttered his suspicions to Brady and Nielson. So he stood by quietly while Tom examined the corpse. When Tom was through they went down stairs again.

Bagley then began a close questioning of the two men. As they talked, the sheriff's gaze wandered around the room. Presently he saw something that caused him to raise his eyebrows, but he said nothing except to continue to ask questions.

## Brady Repeats Story

Brady told the same story he had related to Renningsdale. He was headed for Winslow, from Flagstaff when the blizzard overtook him, so he had stopped at the Halfway House.

Nielson repeated that he was on the way to Phoenix to visit relatives. Asked why he had not taken the direct route from Winslow he said he had lost his way and didn't realize it until he was caught in the storm. Then there was nothing for it except to keep on until he found shelter.

No one knew anything about Kent. He had not talked, except for the brief story he had told Ben after he arrived.

In a few minutes, Bagley arose. "Come on men," he said. "Let's walk down to the stable and look at those horses."

## Finds Missing Hat

It still was very cold outside and the men donned their coats and picked up their hats. As they did so, Bagley watched closely, then turned to Nielson and remarked:

"That's a fine hat you have there. Where'd you get it?"

The young man put it on his head and replied: "Quite a bit back when I was in Phoenix."

"That so? Let's see it."

Without waiting for it to be offered, he took the hat off Nielson's head and put it on his own head. "Fits me good, doesn't it?" he said staring at the man.

Without another word he removed it and pulling down the sweat band, looked inside. Then he pointed to the initials "T.B." hidden on the inside of the band.

"Where did you get this hat?"

Like a flash Nielson drew an ugly looking knife from the inside of his shirt, but Bagley and Renningsdale both had him covered with their guns.

"Drop it and get your hands up," Bagley ordered.

## Nielson Is Handcuffed

In another moment Nielson was handcuffed. Hate flamed in his face and he trembled in rage as he found himself trapped. But he remained silent, refusing to talk.

"All right, I'll tell you where you got the hat," the sheriff said. "You picked it up along the trail when you escaped from killing old man Dobson. You stole

his roan to make your getaway. It's my hat that I lost while I was chasing your horse."

Nielson sneered. "You may be a great detective, Sherlock, but I wasn't near the place you mention and I never heard of Dobson. Ask your great deputy friend here what kind of a horse I was riding when I came in. It's a fact I did pick up the hat on the trail but it wasn't near where you say."

For a moment Bagley was silent. He looked at Renningsdale and the tavern keeper nodded. "That's right, Tom. He rode a gray out here."

In the midst of the conversation, Brady spoke. "But this other fellow, Kent, the guy who shot himself, rode a roan in here and so did I. I noticed Kent and Nielson seemed to recognize each other when Kent came in."

### Blunt Accusation

Instantly, Bagley turned to Nielson. "Why did you kill Kent? Was he with you when you murdered Dobson? Did you kill him here because you were afraid he would talk?"

"Prove it," was all Nielson would say.

Leaving young Hoyt to guard Nielson and Brady, Bagley and Renningsdale went to the stables to look at the horses. A minute later they heard a commotion in the house, the crash of glass, and then they saw Nielson, his hands still shackled, running through the snow toward the trail.

"Stop!" Bagley shouted at the fleeing man, who had taken advantage of a moment when Hoyt had turned to speak to Brady, and jumped through a window. But Nielson kept going.

### Nielson Is Wounded

An instant later there was the roar of a six-gun and Nielson dropped in the snow. When they got to him, he seemed to be in a bad way, a wound in his back. They took him to the house and there he confessed to the murder of Joe Dobson and Kent.

He said that after killing Dobson and stealing his horse, he realized the roan might attract attention to him, so at the first opportunity he sought to trade the animal. He then met Kent on the trail and made the trade, obtaining the gray from him. He said he had never seen Kent before. That night, when Kent unexpectedly came into Halfway House, he became frightened when he was certain Kent recognized him and decided to kill him while he slept.

Later, slipping into the fellow's room, he found his gun on a chair. After stealing a small sum of money from his wallet, he used Kent's gun to shoot him, then put it in his hand and returned to his own room before the house was awakened.

### Find Stolen Money

They searched Nielson's saddle-bags and found more than $500 he had taken from Dobson. The horse he had swapped to Kent proved to be the one he had stolen from old Joe.

Nielson made his confession when he thought he was going to die from the wound inflicted by Sheriff Bagley as he tried to escape, but subsequently he recovered and was tried for murder. He was convicted and sentenced to hang. But before his execution could take place the old wound became infected and he died. He then was identified as one Barrett, of Texas, wanted for robbery and murder in several places.

Brady was exonerated of any blame in the Kent murder. He later was known as a businessman in Albuquerque where he died many years ago.

Kent was identified as a former bartender in Tombstone.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

## CASE OF THE CALICO DOLL

Another True Crime Story of the Southwest

By LUTHER LOCKE

"I got yuh covered," Wall warned two men. "H'ist yore hands!"

# REVENGE OF WINKY WALL

## By BEN FRANK

*When Winky of the Lazy K comes to Trigger Valley hunting for Tom Tilson's killers, two rustlers make a fatal error!*

LIKE as not, if it hadn't been for a certain hombre by the name of William Shakespeare and his knack for writing plays, Winky Wall would be stretched out in a six-by-three hole with a lot of dirt shoveled over his bony, good-natured face. Of course, if it hadn't been for old man Lyzhoft, who made a fortune with a long rope and left a hundred thousand of it to Dry Falls to build a public library, like as not Winky would never have met up with Bill Shakespeare.

And that would have been a pity; for Winky, even if he was as homely as a sack of dried prunes and twice as skinny as a side-hill sapling, was a right likable ranny, as well as a hand for reading print, no matter where he found it.

There was Molly Mosley, too, who wore horn-rimmed glasses and ran the Dry Falls library, and was as fond of Bill Shakespeare as Winky was of his friend Tom Tilson. It was Tom, this friend of Winky's, who got two slugs in his back, that started Winky on a

rampage for revenge. Winky and Bill Shakespeare.

It was plumb accidental how Winky discovered Miss Molly and the library. He came to town one Saturday with a month's pay in his pockets, and while walking from Skelley's poolhall to Toot's bowling alley, he got caught in a rain. Being no hand to get wet, he stepped into a doorway, leaned against the door, and the next thing he knew, he was lying flat on his back in the Dry Falls library.

Miss Molly figured he was tighter than a stuffed owl until he stood up on somewhat bowed but steady legs.

"Sorry, miss," he said. "Seems like the only time I'm safe is when I'm ridin' a hoss."

That didn't sound like a drunk's talk to her, so she smiled and took off her horn-rimmed glasses.

Winky blinked at her in considerable surprise. Without those glasses, she was right pretty. Young, too. Then he saw the shelves of books. He hadn't known before there were so many books in the world. When he found out he could read them free for nothing, he checked out one and took it back to old man Kitterman's Lazy K where he worked.

From then on, Winky was on his way to meet Bill Shakespeare, even if he didn't know it. As for Molly Mosley, she was kind but aloft, not going much for the tall, skinny cowboy with the long sunburned nose, who wore jingling spurs that disturbed the peace and quiet of her library. In fact, Molly didn't give Winky a second look without a frown mixed up in it until he met Bill Shakespeare — which came about on a day when the Arizona sun was hotter than a hay fire in a tin barn.

WINKY was driving staples into a fence post and trying to read a book at the same time when Fred Inche, the Lazy K foreman, rode up.

"Yuh forgot to straddle that last staple over the wire," he said sourly.

Winky blinked unhappily, and a look of embarrassment came to his long face.

He sighed. "Doggone!"

Fred would've likely fired him then and there, for he was getting mighty fed up with Winky's pursuit of literature. But Winky was one of the best men with a horse the Lazy K had, so Fred just cussed under his breath and held out a letter.

"For you, Winky," he said.

Winky read the letter. For a moment, it left him sick and shaking. Then he turned so mad that he could feel his sandy hair sticking straight up under his ten-gallon hat.

"Reckon I could borrow that old forty-five of yourn, Fred?" he asked hoarsely.

"Mebbe," Fred nodded. "Why?"

"This letter's from the sheriff over at Catlick Ridge. Seems my old friend, Tom Tilson, was found with a couple of slugs in his back. Reckon I'll ride over that way and settle up with the drygulcher who shot Tom."

"Now, Winky!" Fred protested. "You ain't no gunman."

Winky tossed the hammer to the ground and tucked the book under his left arm. He had a look on his bony face that Fred Inche had never seen there before, and Fred was smart enough to know that trying to talk Winky out of going to Catlick Ridge was a waste of time. Without a word, he unbuckled his .45 from about his fat middle and handed the outfit to Winky.

The bean-pole ranny buckled on the gun. It sagged half-way to his knee. He climbed on his horse and, his face as grim as a tombstone, headed east.

"Hey," Fred called, "Catlick Ridge is west."

"I know it," Winky said, his voice full of chipped ice, "but I got to go to Dry Falls first. Got to take this book back and get another so's I'll have somethin' to read while I'm lookin' for that drygulcher."

"Plumb loco," Fred said to himself. But he realized that Winky had thought a heap of Tom, and he knew there was no use to reason with Winky at a time like this.

When Winky, spurs jingling, walked into the Dry Falls library, Miss Mosley eyed him disapprovingly through her horn-rimmed glasses. Then she saw the stony look on his face and felt a few cold shivers run along her spine. She took off her glasses for a better look, but this time Winky didn't notice how pretty she was.

He stared about, thinking that he'd take the biggest book he could find so that he'd be sure not to run out of reading before he returned.

"I reckon I'll take that there book, miss," he said.

Gently but firmly, Miss Mosley explained that they didn't check out Webster's International Dictionary.

Winky blinked at her, but said nothing. Still he didn't notice how pretty she was, for inside he was boiling with rage. Tom Tilson had been murdered, and Winky was going to revenge his death. His eyes moved over the shelves and fixed on a huge red volume. He reached out a bony hand and hefted the book.

That was when Miss Mosley really looked at Winky Wall and saw something more than a long, thin cowpoke with a face like a hatful of granite rocks.

"Oh!" she cooed. "So you like Shakespeare, too!"

"Yes'm," he said. "Especially if this is Shakespeare."

"I love Shakespeare," she said. "He's marvelous!"

"No doubt about it," Winky agreed readily, for he was in a hurry and wanted to get started for Catlick Ridge pronto.

"That's our only copy of Shakespeare's complete works," she said. "You'll promise to take good care of it?"

"Yes'm," he promised. "You bet!"

As Miss Mosley watched Winky hurry away, she felt little tingles of delight creeping over her. At last she had met a cowboy who liked Shakespeare. In a way, she'd always had a fondness for cowboys, until she had come from her home in the East and had met some of them. But this one was different. Masterful, yet boyish. A dreamy look came into her lovely blue eyes. . . .

THE natives of Catlick Ridge didn't miss a trick as they watched the long-legged, stony-faced gunman ride into town. Sheriff Jim Jackson ran his fat fingers through his white hair and heaved a sigh. Being a peace loving politician, he felt worried. He allowed to Lawyer "Noisy" Newcomb that like as not Catlick Ridge was in for gun trouble. You could tell that the bony rider was a gunman by the way his gun hung low against his right leg.

There was considerable speculation among the natives as to what the gunman had wrapped in an old slicker and tied behind his worn saddle. Some allowed it must be extra ammunition, while others figured it could be anything from dynamite to a music box.

The rider stopped first at Ma Day's Rooming House and disappeared through the sagging screen door for a matter of some five minutes. When he returned to his paint horse, he studied the bright sky out of blinking eyes, and then untied the slickered bundle.

From the fly-specked windows of the One-Stop Saloon, the object that came out of the bundle appeared to be a large red box. Among those peering through the window were a short, fat man by the name of Zac Patty, and a tall, hawk-faced hombre called "Soup" Ortmeier. They were partners in a ranch in Trigger Valley. The two exchanged worried glances, and Zac wiped beads of cold sweat from his fat face with a soiled bandanna. Neither man said anything.

The red object under one arm, the gunman led his paint to the livery stable and left it. When he came out of the barn, he still carried the red object.

"Looks like he's headin' this a-way," Zac Patty muttered.

Soup Ortmeier nodded his shaggy head and loosened the gun in his holster. He made no comment.

Spurs jingling, the stony-faced man pushed into the One-Stop. Armed with two bottles of beer, he faced about and strode to a vacant table in the back of the room amid an ear-splitting hush. Everybody could now see that the thing he carried under his arm was a huge red book.

In deep silence, they watched him drape his long frame over a chair, set the bottles and the book on the table, shift his heavy gun to a position where it would be handy, and open the book. Talk slowly came back into the room, but it was subdued and cautious.

The gunman took off his big hat. He had sandy hair. He began to read, moving his thin lips silently. A hush settled over the room again. Sheriff Jackson and Lawyer Newcomb eased out on tiptoes. Zac Patty and Soup Ortmeier poured drinks into their glasses with shaking hands. They felt the need of those drinks for some reason or other.

Suddenly the gunman lifted his bony head and blinked straight at Zac Patty. The fat little man dropped his glass, and

the crash made everybody in the room jump. Everybody except the gunman. He had returned to his reading and didn't seem to notice the noise. Right after that, Zac and Soup eased out of the room, feeling the need for fresh air.

Winky Wall, sitting at the table with his long nose buried in the book, realized that this Bill Shakespeare was quite a hombre when it came to putting words on paper. He reckoned he'd never run across anything so tough to read. It seemed that Bill had a nasty habit of using words that were plumb meaningless to Winky. But no matter, Winky guessed he'd read the book from one end to the other. He was a stubborn cuss and a hand to finish whatever he started.

That night, he read until the barkeep, his voice trembling, informed him politely that it was midnight and that the One-Stop had a habit of closing at this time, except Saturdays. Without a word, Winky gathered up Bill Shakespeare and returned to Ma's rooming house, where he spent the night.

The next day, Winky saddled his paint and rode out to Tom's ranch in Trigger Valley. He found Tom's cabin just like Tom had left it when he'd taken his last ride and ended up dead. Winky liked the looks of the valley, and the flow of crystal water that came from a tumble of rocks was enough to make any cattle man happy.

AFTER he'd looked things over, he found a shade tree and started in on Bill Shakespeare again. He was deep into "Measure for Measure" when Soup Ortmeier rode up. Soup's better judgment told him to ride on, but his curiosity didn't. Too, he wanted to know the worst.

He swallowed a painful lump out of his Adam's apple. "Howdy, stranger," he said huskily.

Winky was startled. He leaped to his feet, and his dangling gun swung around and struck his open hand. Automatically, his fingers curled about the black, worn butt.

Soup felt his skin crawl, and big drops of sweat leaped out on his bony face.

"Don't shoot!" he said in husky tones.

Winky blinked at him in some surprise. He let go of the gun. "Do yuh know Bill Shakespeare?" he asked.

Dumbly Soup shook his head, wondering if Bill was a gunman.

"What do yuh think of this?" Winky asked. He began to read aloud:

> May, in the sworn twelve, have a thief or two
> Guiltier than him they try. What's open made to justice,
> That justice seizes. What knows the laws
> That thieves do pass on thieves? 'Tis very—

Soup Ortmeier's face had turned kind of green. He spurred his horse into a dead run and disappeared around the bend of the valley.

Winky blinked at the big book.

"Bill, what was it yuh said there that made that feller look like he'd seen a ghost?" he murmured.

That night, Winky returned to his table in the One-Stop. A hush came over the room. Everyone figured that this bookish gent was waiting for someone, but nobody knew whom. Several had dropped into Ma Day's Rooming House to learn the name of the newcomer, but Ma was closed-mouthed, and they learned exactly nothing. The mystery added to their fear.

Zac Patty and Soup Ortmeier slouched into the smoky room. The sheriff and Noisy Newcomb, the lawyer, were already there. The sheriff figured that it would be good politics to be around when and if any shooting started, not that he wanted to be mixed up in it. The lawyer didn't want to miss out on anything that might develop into a law case. As for Zac and Soup, they were drawn to the One-Stop like a moth to a flame. Winky was the flame.

Winky started in on "As You Like It." His too-large gunbelt was kind of a nuisance, so he unbuckled it and laid the gun behind his propped up book. If he'd bothered to look up, he would have seen a lot of white, tense faces in the room.

Noisy Newcomb was the first man in Catlick Ridge who got up nerve enough to ask Winky any questions. He sidled up to the table, licked a trembling lip.

"Good evening, friend," he said.

Winky, startled, jerked upright in his chair, knocking the gun from the table. He grabbed the gun before it hit the floor, and it slipped out of the holster. Lawyer Newcomb found himself staring into the black muzzle and had to lean on the table to keep his watery knees from giving away.

Gently Winky laid the gun beside Bill Shakespeare.

"Good evenin'," he said politely.

Finding himself still alive, Noisy gained courage.

"My name's Newcomb," he said. "Noisy, they call me because I'm a lawyer."

"Pleased to meet yuh," Winky said. "My name's Winky Wall."

"Not the Winky Wall that Tom Tilson used to mention?"

"I'm him." Winky's face turned to granite. "Kind of lookin' things over here. Figure on catchin' me a skunk."

There was a sudden commotion at the door made by two men trying to go through it at the same time. The two men were Zac Patty and Soup Ortmeier.

"What's eatin' 'em?" Winky asked.

The lawyer shook his head.

SHERIFF JACKSON, his face stiff with worry, eased over to the table and introduced himself.

"Ain't got no idea who shot your friend, or why," he told Winky. "He was doin' right well in the valley, too. Didn't seem to have no enemies. Then one day he come to town and said he was losin' cattle. Bought himself a Winchester. A few days later, he was bushwhacked."

"By the way," Noisy said. "Tom left everything to you, Winky, what there was to leave. Most of his cattle had been rustled, but there's the ranch."

"Since his death there's been more rustlin," the sheriff went on unhappily. "Beats all what becomes of them stolen critters, too."

Winky felt his anger grow.

"If I ever find who shot Tom—" he began hoarsely.

"We got law in this county," the sheriff blustered. "Don't hanker to have a strange gunman come in and—"

His voice choked off, for Winky had picked up the big .45. But when Jackson saw that Winky had picked the gun up just to return it to the holster, he found his voice again.

"Be glad to help yuh if I can," he offered, but his voice carried no conviction.

However, Winky didn't seem to hear him, for his eyes had turned to the book. He began to mumble aloud:

> I would not be thy executioner;
> I fly thee, for I would not inure thee.
> Thou tell'st me there is murder in mine eye:
> 'Tis pretty, sure, and very probable—

The sheriff and Lawyer Newcomb backed swiftly away from the table where Winky sat, turned and headed through the batwings. Outside they stopped in the darkness and took deep breaths of the cool, clean air. They both allowed that a crazy killer had sure enough moved into Catlick Ridge, and neither of them knew what to do about it.

Promptly at closing time, Winky Wall buckled on his gun and retired to Ma Day's Rooming House. The fact that the natives of Catlick Ridge were mortally afraid of him, he never noticed. There were two reasons for this lack of observation on his part. One was Bill Shakespeare. Bill had him worried. Two-thirds of Bill's writing baffled him completely, but Winky wasn't one to give up on anything he'd once started.

The other reason he hadn't noticed the fear he had created was simply that when he wasn't worrying about Bill, he was burning with rage over Tom's death and cussing himself because he hadn't made any headway in catching up with Tom's killer. Both reasons taken together were enough to put a deadly glint into any man's eyes and pull the skin tight over his face.

It was the eyes and the face and the way Winky had of fumbling absently with the big Colt that scared the pants off everybody around Catlick Ridge, whether he had a guilty feeling about something, or not. Devilment quieted down in the town, and some of the slick-fingered gamblers became mighty cautious about dealing from the bottom of the deck.

The following morning, Winky again rode into Trigger Valley. This time he went on past Tom's place and around the bend in the valley. In the distance, he saw another ranch, but he got to worrying about Bill Shakespeare and didn't pay much attention to things. He rode on, hugging the valley wall, his blinking eyes fixed on the big red book propped open on the saddle horn.

A title caught his attention: "All's Well that Ends Well." He liked the sound of that. Kind of gave him a feeling that things might work out here in Catlick Ridge. He started reading:

In delivering my son from me, I bury
a second husband.
And I, in going, madam, weep o'er my
father's death anew.

So absorbed did he become that the next thing he knew, he found himself in a walled canyon with a small herd of cattle. The thing that struck him about the cattle was the mixture of brands they bore.

Then he began to look for a way out of the place into which his horse had carried him while he was having a round with Bill. There was just one way out. Looking back from Trigger Valley, he was astonished at how well the entrance of the canyon was hidden by some tumbled boulders. It beat all what a man would run into while he was reading a book.

THEN suddenly the wheels in his head spun, and he jerked upright. A bunch of mixed brands looked mighty like what you'd expect to find in a rustler's herd. Maybe, he reasoned, Tom's setting up ranching in the valley had cut into someone's plans. Maybe the rustlers needed that bubbling spring of water for their stolen stock. And it could be that Tom had discovered the hideout. Or again, it could be that Tom had been in someone's road.

By the time Winky got back to Catlick Ridge, it was time to put on the feed bag. He ate absently, thinking about what he had stumbled on. He picked up Bill Shakespeare and headed through the gathering darkness for the One-Stop Saloon, knowing that tonight his reading would be a pretense, for he'd keep his ears open. Somebody might let a word slip that would give him ideas.

He took his usual table and propped the big book up between two bottles of beer, but he didn't read a word. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sheriff Jackson and Noisy Newcomb come into the room. After a time, Zac Patty and Soup Ortmeier shuffled in and put their big boots on the brass rail.

"How're things in Trigger Valley, boys?" the sheriff boomed.

"About the same," Zac answered nervously.

Winky stiffened. Zac and Trigger Valley—the ranch beyond the bend. Maybe that ranch belonged to the fat man and his thin pal.

He shoved to his feet, and his holstered gun thudded against the table. Everyone in the room jumped and faced him. For the first time, he noticed the fear on the faces and wondered what was wrong. He even turned around to see if any scary looking hombre was behind him. No one was.

He sidled up to the bar, and his gun got in the way, so he hitched it around in front. Everyone along the bar stiffened and stood rock still, not even breathing for a time.

"Do yuh two gents live in Trigger Valley?" he asked.

Zac wet his fat lips. "Yeah," he mumbled tightly.

"On t'other side of where Tom Tilson lived?"

Soup's eyes shifted to the batwings, while mentally he calculated how many steps it would take him to get through it.

"Yuh didn't say yes or no," Winky reminded Zac.

Both men jumped as if they'd been touched by a hot branding iron.

"Yeah," Zac said hoarsely. "T'other side of Tom's place."

"Do yuh know about—"

Winky stopped talking and blinked at the two men. He was about to mention the hidden canyon, but suddenly he decided against it. In a strange town, you never knew whom you could trust. Besides, after taking a good look at these two men, he didn't like what he saw. As for the sheriff and the lawyer, he remembered that they had acted kind of queer the night before when he read some of Bill Shakespeare to them.

Right then and there, Winky Wall felt a deep mistrust for everyone. In fact, he reckoned the only wise method was to go about this business on his own.

Accidentally, his hand brushed against the gun butt, and his long fingers closed about it. He heard Soup Ortmeier suck in a queer breath. Zac Patty's pale eyes liked to jumped out of their sockets. The sheriff and the lawyer hastily moved away from the bar. Winky was puzzled by everyone's actions. Absently he twisted the gun loose from the holster.

Soup let out a hoarse cry and dived through the batwings. Zac tried to follow, stumbled over his own feet and fell flat, striking his head against the brass rail of the bar. He let out a heavy sigh and passed into a dreamless sleep.

Winky stared down at the man. He

stared at the still swinging batwings. He turned his blinking eyes on the sheriff.

"What happened?" he asked.

The sheriff blinked back at him. His face was bloodless.

"I reckon Zac and Soup thought yuh was goin' to draw on 'em," Jackson answered. "They probably figured they didn't have a chance against a quick trigger man like you."

"Why," Winky said mildly, "I ain't goin' to shoot nobody but the feller who bushwhacked Tom. Them jaspers ain't got no reason to be afraid unless—"

HIS voice trailed off. He remembered the cattle in the canyon. Zac and Soup's ranch was not far from the entrance.

"Unless what?" the sheriff asked weakly.

"Nothin'," Winky gritted, and shuffled back to his table.

The sheriff didn't press the question. The killer look was back on Winky's bony face, and the sheriff himself was no gun-slinger. He was a politician which, up until the murder of Tom Tilson, had been enough for Catlick Ridge. As he helped some men carry the unconscious Zac Patty into a back room, he wondered what kind of an excuse he could offer along with his resignation. Sheriff Jackson was a peace loving hombre. Besides, he had a wife and family.

Once again at the table, Winky propped Bill Shakespeare in front of his eyes, but he didn't see a word. He was trying to figure out a way to have a showdown with the two spooky ranchers of Trigger Valley. He wished he knew whether or not he could trust the sheriff but, after thinking it over, he decided to go it alone, for he didn't want any slip-up in revenging Tom's death. Also, he guessed from now on, he'd read Shakespeare at the mouth of the hidden canyon until he discovered who was going in and out of the place with all those mixed cattle.

After a while the sheriff came out of the back room alone.

"Where's Zac?" the barkeep asked.

"Went out the back way," the sheriff answered. "Said the bright lights in here hurt his eyes."

The sheriff went on out through the batwings without glancing in Winky's direction.

Winky returned to Bill Shakespeare. He read:

> For such a business; therefore am I found
> So much unsettled: this drives me to entreat you
> That presently you take your way home—

Home?

Winky reckoned he'd have to be heading back that way before too long, or Miss Mosley would get to worrying about the book. She'd seemed right fond of it, even had made him promise he'd take good care of it. But he had to settle his business here first before he returned to Dry Falls.

The next morning, he saddled his paint and headed for Trigger Valley with Bill Shakespeare bundled up in the old slicker, for there was a smell of rain in the air. Also, he had a box of grub which he'd talked Ma Day into fixing. It hadn't been any trick to talk Ma into it, for he and Ma got along fine. She'd been right fond of Tom Tilson, and when she learned that Winky was out gunning for Tom's murderer, she was ready to back him up with all the grub he wanted.

He rode up to Tom's cabin and stood for a time on the front porch, looking along the green valley. It was a right pretty sight, and he decided that if he ever got the bushwhacker finished off, he'd move into Tom's cabin and do some ranching on his own.

Then, for some unexplainable reason, he thought of Molly Mosley—without her glasses, of course. He reckoned she was mighty smart. She would have to be to run a library. No doubt, she could explain what Bill was trying to say in the big red book. For a couple of minutes, a dreamy look came into his eyes as he thought how it would be with Molly reading to him in the quietness of Tom's cabin.

He got out the lunch and ate some of it, sitting on the small front porch. He wondered if Miss Mosley appreciated the beauty of mountains and valleys. He had an idea she did, and anyone smart enough to understand Bill Shakespeare surely could cook.

But the angry glint came back into his eyes as he remembered the business at hand. He straddled his paint and headed toward the bend in the valley.

From overhead came a rumble of thunder and he noticed that a rain was mov-

ing in over the mountains. A few drops sprinkled his upturned face. It looked as if he was in for a shower. He slid to the ground, removed the slicker from Bill Shakespeare and shrugged his long arms and bony shoulders into it. Of course, he couldn't let Bill get wet, so he tucked the big book in under the slicker and rode on. . . .

EVER since Zac Patty had open his eyes in the back room of the One-Stop Saloon, he'd had but one thought in mind—to pack up and get out of the country while the getting was good. Zac had no stomach for gun fighting. Besides, he figured that he and Soup could likely do as well some place else with their rustling, and some place else would be a heap safer, especially since this long-legged gun-slick had moved into Catlick Ridge. He thought of Winky Wall's hardeyed face and shuddered.

When Zac suggested they move on, Soup Ortmeier slowly shook his head. He said they had a good thing here, stealing a few steers and hiding them in the canyon, then moving them on through the valley a few days later. There wasn't likely one chance in a thousand that they'd find another sheriff as easy-going and as gun-shy as Jim Jackson. He reckoned the thing to do was to lay for Winky Wall and give him the same dose of lead poison that he had given Tom Tilson, who had found their hideout.

Since Soup, who was a good shot if he wasn't rushed, offered to do the dirty work, Zac decided to string along. So early that morning, the two of them rode to the bend in the valley, hid their horses and made themselves as comfortable as possible on a ledge that overlooked the trail. They figured rightly that Winky had found the hidden canyon and would return for a second look.

A mountain shower came and went, leaving a clean smell behind it. Right then, Winky came jogging along the trail on his paint, a nice target in a black slicker. Soup licked his whiskery lips, laid the long barrel of his Colt over a boulder and shut his left eye.

Zac felt beads of cold sweat working out on his fat face.

"Take yore time," he whispered hoarsely to his partner. "This time make one shot do it."

"Don't worry," Soup said tightly. "I'll wait till he gets right close. This time I ain't wastin' no extra shot!"

Winky, unaware of the trap, studied the sky. It looked like it was going to clear up. His long nose sniffed the air. It smelled mighty pretty with all the dust washed out of it. He came to the bend and glanced back. A wonderful place to fatten cattle—and Tom had left it to him. But he wouldn't claim it until he'd avenged Tom's death.

Grimly he faced forward—and a shot crashed out. Something hit him in the chest like a sledge hammer blow. He couldn't breathe. Or see. Or keep in the saddle. The blackness swooped down.

The next thing Winky Wall knew, he was lying flat on the high wet grass. His insides felt as if they'd been crammed into a teacup, and his head rang like a bell. He reckoned he was hard hit and due to cash his chips. He tried taking a deep breath, but the pain was too much for that. Shot through the lungs, he decided. He tried moving his right arm. That worked. Then he lifted his eyes and saw two men with drawn sixes approaching from above. He recognized them instantly—Zac Patty and Soup Ortmeier. Right then he knew they were coming to finish him off, and there wasn't anything he could do about it.

That was when he remembered Bill Shakespeare. He'd promised to return Bill to Miss Mosley, and he couldn't let her down. Besides, he had no doubt now that Zac and Soup were the bushwhackers who'd killed Tom.

Carefully he worked his borrowed six-gun out of the holster, the tall grass hiding the movement of his arm. His thumb hooked over the hammer, clicked it back. He saw that the fat Zac had holstered his gun in order to have both hands free as he climbed down the steep valley wall. Careful not to move anything except his gun hand, Winky got the sights lined on Soup. He tried taking another deep breath. This time there wasn't so much pain.

"I got yuh covered!" he panted. "H'ist yore hands!"

SOUP made the mistake of his life. He lifted his gun to take aim. Winky let him have it. On top of the blast, Soup yelled, dropped his gun and rolled down the hill. He didn't move after that.

Zac was smarter. He lifted both fat hands.

"Don't shoot!" he bawled. I give up!"

Winky sat up. Keeping his gun centered on Zac's quaking middle, he felt for the wound in his chest with his free hand. He didn't find any blood, and there was no wound, no nothing, except Bill Shakespeare, which he had buttoned under his slicker so the book wouldn't get wet.

He pulled Bill out and blinked at him. Bill, he realized would never again be the kind of a book a man would dare return to Molly Mosley, for Soup's slug had torn a black jagged hole through every page except the last dozen or so.

A great rage came over Winky. He stumbled to his feet and advanced on the trembling fat man. He came to Soup's lifeless body and stepped over it. He doubled up a bony fist.

"Yuh low-down, fat little skunk!" he roared. "I'm goin' to bust yuh!"

"I didn't do nothin'!" Zac whimpered. "Soup's the one who thought up this rustlin' business. He's the one who put Tom Tilson out of the way. He's the one that shot yuh. Don't hit me! I'll tell everything to the sheriff."

Winky gouged him with the gun. The fat man's knees gave way, and he keeled over in a dead faint.

By the time Winky had hauled Zac into Sheriff Jackson's office, the fat little rustler had come to and was babbling out his confession.

Sheriff Jackson was mighty relieved about the way things had worked out. And so was Lawyer Newcomb, who happened to be at the office. They both hoped Winky would move in on Tom's ranch, and the sheriff said he reckoned Winky would make a right good deputy for Catlick Ridge. Winky shook hands with both men and said he reckoned he'd be back as soon as he got some business in Dry Falls straightened up.

Two days later, head humbly bowed, Winky Wall jingled his way into the quietness of the Dry Falls library. He was empty handed except for his ten-gallon hat, which he rolled into a ball with his nervous fingers.

Molly Mosley was alone. She smiled up at him pleasantly.

"Hello," she said. "How did you like the book?"

WINKY blinked but didn't look at her. Inside he was tied up in a knot from two days' worrying.

"Fine," he said truthfully. "I reckon that's the greatest book there ever was written. Yuh've no idea what it did for me."

Miss Mosley's smile deepened. She took off her glasses, and her blue eyes were full of shining lights.

"I'm so glad you like Shakespeare," she murmured. "Did you finish it?"

"Yes'm," Winky confessed, "I finished it." Then, hopefully, "I liked it so good I decided to keep it." He fished a ten-dollar bill out of his pocket. "Here—maybe yuh could buy the library a new one with this."

Molly Mosley looked up at him admiringly. He, indeed, was a rare speciman of cowboy, one who liked Shakespeare. He was her kind of man. No doubt about it!

Winky looked down at her. She was prettier than a field of daisies. Soft blue eyes, red lips, hair that made him think of ripe wheat in the sun. Suddenly he found himself telling her about the wonders of Trigger Valley and the ranch which Tom had left him.

"Maybe you'd like it there?" he finished hopefully. "Yuh could read Shakespeare to me in the evenings."

Molly started to put her glasses back on. Winky didn't like those glasses, and he caught her hands. Molly didn't try to pull away. She just smiled at him, thinking how strong and masterful he was. Handsome, too, in a round-about way.

Yes, Molly decided quickly, she would like Trigger Valley.

And, like as not, if Bill Shakespeare had been around, he would've sat right down and wrote another play. One about a lanky cowpoke and a pretty girl who quit wearing glasses.

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# New Year's Decision

The Indians were between Sperry and the post

by JOHNSTON McCULLEY

***When the Comanches gather to attack, Trooper Sperry faces a hard problem!***

AT POST headquarters at Fort Wallace, an orderly stepped through the door and tacked a sheet of paper on the official bulletin board.

By that simple act, he unconsciously started a train of events that upset a diabolical scheme for murder and loot created by Swift Lizard, a Comanche sub-chief who was a reservation malcontent. It also resulted in the arrest and punishment of a renegade trader, and turned a no-good yellowleg into a proper soldier and a man.

Having put the notice in position, the orderly darted back inside. It was the middle of the afternoon on the last day

of the year, and the steady wind that swept down upon the post from the rolling Kansas hills had a bite to it.

The sky was clear and the sun was bright. An inch of frozen snow splotched the ground. A lower temperature no doubt would come with the night. But there would be a rather hot New Year's Eve party at the post to alleviate the cold.

Captain Richard Thole, post commander, was a good sort. He knew that men and women cooped up by winter needed something to break a dreary monotony. In addition to his troopers, who kept in touch with Fort Hay in one direction and Sheridan City on the other, making Fort Wallace a sort of halfway liaison point, the post now sheltered officers' ladies and troopers' wives and children, several traders waiting to make the trip to Sheridan City on the new Kansas Pacific railroad, an assortment of lazy Indians who did nothing but loaf and beg, and a couple of land speculators.

Captain Thole had held a celebration at the post on Christmas, but that had been a sedate affair. His New Year's Eve party would be the opposite. There would be a dance, food and drink for all, a measure of free liquor for every man in uniform, a lot of noise at midnight, and a big bonfire to be kindled on the parade ground as the new year was born.

TWO troopers going from their quarters to the canteen to build a basis for the liquid refreshment to come during the evening, paused before the bulletin board and inspected the orderly's work.

It was an official order signed by Captain Thole. It read:

SPECIAL GUARD DETAIL
NEW YEAR'S EVE
Inside post—Jones, Murphy, Green, Edwards.
Outside patrol—Sperry and Hamlin.

"Hamlin, 'cause he got drunk on Christmas, and Sperry, 'cause he's plain ornery," one of the troopers said.

"Tough," the other soldier commented. "Havin' to hit their saddles and ride patrol away from the post on a cold night."

"Two men do it every night, don't they?"

"Right! But tonight, when everybody inside will be havin' fun! Think of the free drink and grub they'll miss. They'll be near enough to hear the music and see the bonfire, yet away from it. 'S tough!"

The troopers wandered on to the canteen to tell other yellowlegs there that Sperry and Hamlin had drawn outside patrol for New Year's Eve.

At that moment, Jed Sperry was ignorant of the blow Fate had dealt him. He was behind a log barracks filling a canteen with whisky from a bottle he had managed to steal in the post canteen the night before during the confusion caused by a brawl between two troopers.

He intended to have a wet New Year's Eve, and that called for more than the few drinks the captain would serve. And Jed Sperry's credit at the official post canteen was nil; he had overdrawn his monthly allotment, and Captain Thole had ordered the sutler to give no extra credit.

Jed Sperry was tall and slender, with red hair and eyes that could have been called green. He could be a raging demon one moment and a docile babe the next. His attire was always slovenly, his equipment always calling the maledictions of Sergeant Tim Mahoney down upon him. He cared for his mount well enough, but that was because he liked horses, army or otherwise.

In the army, Sperry was a misfit. He had joined up right after the War between the States because he disliked hard work on his uncle's farm, and had the mistaken belief that army life was a loafing job except when it came to a fight. Jed Sperry liked to fight.

But there had been no fighting since he had joined up, except a few brushes with small bands of roving Indians which had amounted to little in the way of excitement. Sperry had found army life a monotony of moving whenever a bugle blew, of standing guard, going on fuel and water details, cleaning stables—a life that to him made a farm seem like a rest home.

He couldn't get out of it without deserting, and he didn't want to do that. He had witnessed what had happened to a couple of deserters, and hadn't liked it.

The one bright spot in his life at the post was Sally Mahoney, Sergeant Mahoney's blonde daughter. She smiled upon him at times, and might have taken him seriously if Sperry had been more worth while. But even Sally Mahoney could not brace him up. And Sperry considered her father, the gruff old ser-

geant who had lived through the war, his particular enemy.

He didn't realize that Mahoney saw good in him and was trying to wake him up and bring it out. In Mahoney's criticisms he saw only the gruff orders of an overbearing man who had a brief moment of authority. The sergeant was always "picking on him," he told those of his comrades who would listen.

Behind the barracks building, Jed Sperry continued his preparations for the evening celebration. He filled the canteen and cracked the empty bottle on a rock, and bundled the filled canteen up in a blanket he had with him.

He intended to cache the canteen in a certain place, and get it out after collecting what free drinks he could. But he was going to slick up some and have a couple of dances with Sally Mahoney before he got around to serious drinking, he promised himself.

WITH the canteen wrapped in the blanket and the blanket beneath his arm, Trooper Jed Sperry went around to the front of the barracks and started across the parade ground toward the stables.

He didn't want to be seen by the stable guard, for he intended to hide the whisky-filled canteen in a grain bin. So his manner was rather furtive. He glanced around continually and tried to walk gently so his boot soles would not squeak on the frozen snow.

He went quietly around a corner of the building, hoping to slip in at a rear door, and came to an abrupt stop. Standing against the wall of the stable was a blanketed Indian; Sperry knew him for a lazy Comanche who hung around the post most of the time to beg or steal.

In front of the Comanche stood a portly man of middle age, who had a liquor-reddened face decorated with a large black mustache. He was Harley Baker, reputed to be a trader, and also reputed to be careless when it came to scrupulousness in his business dealings.

Baker was loud-mouthed and bombastic, and got sarcastic at times. Even if he did buy free drinks for troopers frequently, Jed Sperry did not like him. He wondered why Captain Thole tolerated the man in the post. Baker drove away with his wagon at times, and drifted back again, supposedly always on his way between the railroad at Sheridan City and the Fort Hay district. Sperry had certain suspicions about the trader, and seeing Baker in secret conversation with a Comanche did not allay those suspicions a bit.

The friendly wind carried Baker's talk to Sperry's ears.

"Swift Lizard won't be friends with me, when I could do so much for him," Baker was telling the Comanche. "Remember what I've told you. Think of the revenge Swift Lizard could have on the yellowlegs. Plenty of ponies, too, and grub and heap firewater. Big fire, and the post wiped out."

"Why you tell me?" the Comanche asked.

"So you can tell Swift Lizard, and he'll know I am his friend and trade with me. Tell him that after his work is done I'll show him where to find the firewater and grub and the army ponies. Plenty pretty things, too."

The Comanche caught sight of Sperry and grunted a word of alarm. Baker turned swiftly, and to him it looked as if Sperry had just stepped around the corner of the building. He whispered something to the Comanche, and the Indian pulled his blanket up to his ears and shuffled away.

"Hello, Sperry!" the trader greeted. "Been wishin' I had a chance to talk to you."

"What about?" Sperry asked.

"Oh, I—I just think you're gettin' a bad deal around here. Noticed a few minutes ago that you're posted for outside patrol tonight—on New Year's Eve."

"What?" Rage was expressed in that one word. "I didn't know that."

"List is on the bulletin board. They're sure rubbin' it in on you, Sperry. Old Sarge Mahoney, of course. Makin' a man ride around all night a few miles from where they're havin' fun. It'll be cold tonight, too."

"What can I do about it?" Sperry asked.

"I don't know. But I'd get square with 'em, if I were you."

"What's the powwow you were havin' with that lazy Injun?"

"That?" Baker laughed. "I've got it in for Swift Lizard, the young hothead who's chasin' around the hills with a band of young men. Just buildin' up some trouble for him. He won't trade with me. I'm fixin' to get Swift Lizard

into trouble. I always get square with them as ain't on my side."

"Got to be goin'—got somethin' to do," Sperry said.

"Drop into the canteen a little later, and I'll buy you a New Year's drink. You'll need it, ridin' patrol tonight."

"I'll be there," Sperry replied.

HE SHUFFLED on to the corner of the stable as Baker hurried away. He knew he should go to the captain and report what he had heard. But he was enraged at the thought of riding patrol.

He would miss the dances with Sally Mahoney, the fancy grub, the free drinks, the music and bonfire. The sergeant had arranged it, the mean scut! Sergeant Mahoney always made out the special details and the captain merely signed them.

Sperry got into the stable and hid the whisky in the grain bin. He got out again without being seen, and drifted toward the canteen. He stopped at the bulletin board and confirmed the bad news Harley Baker had told him.

While he was scowling at the order, Sally Mahoney joined him on her way home to her father's cabin from the post store.

"The Sarge has taken another slap at me," Sperry pointed out. "A fine New Year's Eve I'll have! Was hopin' to dance with you a couple of times. Why does the Sarge pick on me?"

"Oh, Jed! He isn't picking on you. He goes by the black marks in the book. You and Hamlin had low ratings, so you get this duty. I—I'll bake a cake and give you a hunk of it when you ride in."

"That won't be dancin' and havin' fun at the party," Sperry grumbled.

"Why don't you try to be a better soldier, Jed? Dad says you've got brains and that you're quick to learn when you want to do it. You could be a corporal soon, Jed."

"I'd rather be post bugler."

"Why?"

"I like the job. And a man doesn't have to stand guard duty—"

"That's it, Jed! That's all you're thinking about, an easier job!"

"What of it? I bought that old bugle,

[*Turn Page*]

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and I practice all the time when I'm out in the open. The Sarge won't let me practice here in the post any more—says it's confusin'. The men get my bugle calls mixed up with the post bugler's and then they do a lot of useless runnin' around."

Sally giggled. She remembered the evening Jed had blown assembly and boots-and-saddles and had all the troopers tumbling out and rushing for the stables.

Sally hurried on home, and Sperry turned back toward the stables. He got inside and unearthed the canteen and took a couple of deep swigs. Then he went to his quarters to dig out some heavy clothing to use during his night patrol.

Retreat was a perfunctory ceremony that evening. After it was over, Sergeant Mahoney talked to the special guard detail. He gave orders to the inside guards and then faced Sperry and Hamlin.

"Take the north circle, Sperry—Hamlin take the south," he instructed. "Get goin' right after you eat. I'll inspect you before you leave post. Report to me here."

Sperry grumbled as he went to the mess hall. Inspect, huh? That meant no doubt that the sergeant would sniff at the contents of Sperry's canteen. But Sperry had a way around that.

Mess call was sounded, and that made him think of his old bugle. Just to help pass the time he decided to take his old bugle along and practice during the night, out where the sergeant couldn't squawk about it. His bugle and a canteen filled with good whisky—he might have himself a good New Year's Eve at that!

Sergeant Mahoney sniffed the canteen, all right, and found that it contained water. Sperry and Hamlin mounted and prepared to ride. The wind had died down, the sky was still clear, and the weather was turning colder.

"Nice New Year's Eve," Sperry grumbled.

"Somebody has to ride patrol," the sergeant retorted.

"Why pick on me?"

"The record shows you're at the top of the demerit list, Jed. You've been assigned to this patrol, and that settles it. I'll save a couple of drinks for you."

Hamlin already had ridden away, and Jed started his mount and rode slowly toward the stables, beyond which was the rear gate in the stockade.

SURE that the sergeant had gone into headquarters, he rode behind the stable, went inside and got the whisky-filled canteen, which he exchanged for the one filled with water. He got his bugle, too, and fastened it to the pommel of his saddle. Then he rode to the gate.

The gate guard was feeling good to the point of sarcasm.

"Goin' for a ride, Jed?" he asked. "You outside patrol boys are in hard luck. We've got it fixed here so's we can change off and on and spend a little time at the party. When you're shiverin' out there tonight, lad, think of us makin' merry."

"You go to the devil!" Jed Sperry told him; and he rode out through the gate and got his pony into a lope.

He followed the usual patrol for half an hour, riding out about three miles and then commencing the arc of a circle that he would follow to a meeting point with Hamlin.

He brooded as he rode. He was tired of all this discipline and being ordered around. He'd get out of it somehow. The army meant nothing to him! Crooked traders and Injuns who were warlike ceased to interest him. He remembered the scene between Harley Baker and the Comanche, and failed to regret that he had not reported it. Let 'em all go hang!

The canteen was handy, and Sperry took a swig now and then. He reached the junction point and waited for Hamlin behind a clump of brush where it was not so cold. Hamlin joined him after a few minutes, and Sperry proffered his canteen.

"Did the same thing," Hamlin admitted, grinning and offering his own. "We can have a few drinks, anyhow."

"No sense ridin' around all night," Sperry decided.

"We'd better keep to the patrol. Be just like Mahoney to slip out with a man and try to catch us neglectin' duty. He's after my scalp, the Sarg is—your scalp, too."

They separated, and Sperry began the return trip, to do half the circle and meet with Hamlin again on the far side of Fort Wallace. These patrols were supposed to observe sights and sounds

that might presage anything irregular, such as skulking Indians, traders off their trails for nefarious reasons, travelers in trouble and all that.

The night wore on. Sperry began feeling tired. He rode nearer the post and forgot about meeting Hamlin again. He got near enough to hear music now and then when a puff of the light wind came in his direction.

He reached a spot he knew and dismounted. Here was a little cup in the ground fringed with thick brush, and with a jumble of rocks along two sides. Sperry rode down into it before dismounting, d r o p p e d his reins and stretched to rid himself of saddle cramp. The wind was coming up, and down here it would not hit him.

No sense in riding around and around, he told himself. He would take it easy. He would tell Hamlin he had failed to see him and so had turned back. He would brace himself against a rock with his canteen held handy, and drink for warmth and mental stimulation.

So he did. The mental stimulation got to the point of convincing him that he was the football of the world. He began feeling sorry for himself. He thought of getting his bugle and practicing a few calls, and then thought again what was the use? He'd never get the job of post bugler when the present bugler was mustered out in a few months. Mahoney would give that job to one of his pets. Anyhow, Sperry was comfortable now. Why get up and walk the few feet to his horse and get the bugle?

The stars told him it was getting along toward midnight, was past eleven probably. At midnight, they would touch off the oil-soaked bonfire at the post and dance around it, and eat and drink and have a merry time. And he, Jed Sperry, would be out here like a blanket Indian, squatting on the ground and guzzling whisky.

He heard his horse give a slight snort, and the moonlight was bright enough for Sperry to see that the horse had put up his ears. He got up quickly and went to the horse to hold his nostrils and prevent a betraying whinny. He soothed him in soft whispers, got his carbine out of the saddle boot and stood ready.

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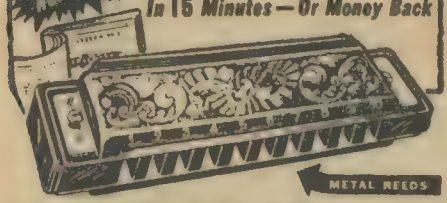


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He heard a hoof strike a rock somewhere near, then a mumble of voices. Men were riding near the little cup in which he was hidden. He heard them stop, and then could distinguish the words of a speaker who was talking Comanche.

He made out that the speaker was Chief Swift Lizard. And as he listened Sperry's hair went on end.

"Line out to right and left . . . get close to the palisade . . . be careful not to be seen . . . leave your ponies . . . when I give signal, yell and commence shooting . . . the guards at the gates will be drunk, so the man Baker sent word . . . kill and burn when we get inside . . . the man Baker will show us where plenty firewater is kept . . . take what you want . . . no prisoners . . . we will take them by surprise . . ."

Sperry understood everything. This would be a night attack on the post by this crazy youngster, Swift Lizard, and his crazy young companions who had refused to abide by reservation rules. Those at the post would be caught unawares. The troopers would drive off the Indians in time, and possibly kill most of them and chase those they did not kill.

But before that, in the moment of surprise, much damage would be done. Sperry could visualize the gate guards slain, the Indians firing into the post, shooting down men and possibly women as they ran out into the open where the bright moonlight would reveal them.

The post must be warned. It was his duty to give the warning, to save lives and property.

The outside night patrol had been established for just this.

And the Indians were between him and the post!

He heard them riding away. He got up behind the rocks to look. More than twenty of them, he judged, and they were spreading out slightly to right and left, riding slowly through the shadows, as silent as shadows themselves.

It was only a short distance to the post. When the wind gave a gust, Sperry could here the music of the cavalry musicians. They were dancing and laughing there. In a few minutes, they would

emerge into the open and touch off the bonfire.

If the Indians struck just then, when the light from the fire made everybody in the post an easy target, Sperry knew what would follow—a massacre! For it would take time for the troopers to get over the shock of surprise, get to their weapons and begin to repel the attack.

What did it matter to him? He asked himself that. He felt a little fear for Sally, but that was all. The post commander who often had rebuked him, the old sergeant who berated him, the other troopers who sneered openly at him—he cared nothing for them!

But he gulped when he thought this. Somehow, the picture was wrong. He was at a place where he had a swift decision to make.

He could keep back, not mix in at all, and when it was all over he could ride in to look at the ruins and report he had been driven away and had been forced to ride hard to escape capture and death himself.

Or, he could take a soldier's chance and try to do something about it. After all, the people in the post were his kind. He couldn't stand by idly and have them massacred without even lifting a hand to prevent it. After all, the army had clothed and fed him and drilled him and only asked that he obey regulations and submit to necessary discipline.

He made his decision—he would do what he could.

But, what could he do? The Indians were between him and the post. He was too far away to give a warning. If he fired his carbine, it might not attract attention from the gate guards—but it would attract the attention of the Indians to him, and they would come dashing back and get him, even if he did get a couple of them first. There was no percentage for him in that.

The Comanches had ridden on. Jed Sperry ran back and got into his saddle and rode up out of the little cup and took after them, keeping into the spots of deeper shadow. He gained on them without being observed, then hung back a proper distance. The way they were riding, there was no possibility of him getting through their line and to the

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gate of the post to give the alarm.

The wind carried music and laughter to Sperry's ears. He knew it was within a few minutes of midnight. If he did anything valuable at all in the way of alarm, he must do it quickly.

He saw the Comanches stop and begin dismounting, turning their ponies loose. The moonlight glistened on weapons they held, weapons bought from unscrupulous traders like Baker. He could try to make a wild ride, but probably would be shot out of his saddle. That might give an alarm, but might mean his death, too.

And then nobody would know that Baker had engineered this thing. Sperry guessed it was Baker's revenge because Swift Lizard would not trade with him—the trader would have the Comanches attack and finally be driven off, leaving dead and wounded behind them.

Sperry reached for the canteen and drank deeply, choking back a cough as the fiery liquor deluged his throat. As he replaced the canteen on the pommel, his ungloved hand struck his old bugle. An idea came to him. It was a wild and whisky-induced idea, just crazy enough to work.

Sperry dismounted behind a clump of brush and ground-hitched his horse. He felt of his side arm, got his carbine and bugle, fastened the canteen to his belt, and started forward through the night, careful to make no noise, keeping as close to the ground as possible and availing himself of every bit of cover.

The Comanches were worming their way forward over the frozen ground and across the patches of snow. Sperry kept pace with their progress. He stopped once to take another swig out of his canteen, then went on.

Voices came to him from the post on the wind. He guessed that everybody there was going out upon the parade ground to gather around the bonfire, so it must be about midnight. And he remembered something that he thought might help.

At midnight, it was the usual thing for the troopers to fire their guns into the air by way of starting the celebration, of welcoming the new year. If they did that at the right moment tonight, it might startle the Comanches, might

make them think their advance had been noticed and that the troopers were ready for them. Yet they might wonder why no bullets came near them, since the troopers were reputed to be good shots.

Jed Sperry thought he could do something about that.

He heard the Comanches passing some word along their line, and judged the moment had come. Sperry flattened himself in an appropriate spot, held his carbine and put his side gun and his bugle near at hand.

A wild yell came downwind to him, and he guessed that was the signal from Chief Swift Lizard to commence the attack. Wild yells came from the throats of the other Indians, too, as they started forward and began firing at the gate.

At the same instant, gunfire started in the post, and Sperry knew midnight had come and things were working out as he had hoped.

That gunfire stopped the mad charge of the Comanches toward the gate. But the gunfire continued and no bullets sang around their ears. Sperry took a hand then. The moonlight revealed several of the Comanches, and he aimed carefully and fired. He fired a second time, scoring the second hit. He yelled wildly, like a commanding officer:

"Foragers right and left! Fire at will!"

He seized the bugle and blew the charge. He yelled again and used his carbine, used his side gun, made a one-man battle of it. Again he blew his bugle.

Those at the post had guessed something was wrong. The gate guards were shooting and yelling. Troopers were commencing to fire from loopholes in the palisade. The Comanches leaped for cover.

Sperry blew his bugle and opened fire again, having reloaded swiftly. He yelled more orders. The Comanches arose and ran for their ponies, bent double. They mounted, hung to the sides of their mounts and began a swift retreat.

JED SPERRY got in the shot he wanted. He picked out Chief Swift Lizard from his headdress; his bullet smashed the Comanche in the hip as he

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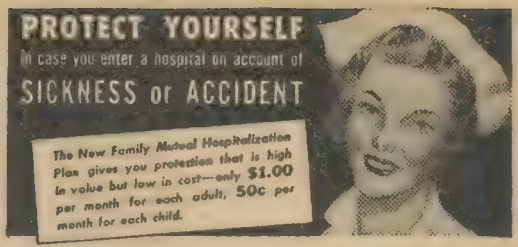
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tried to mount.

The Comanches rode away wildly without knowing their leader had been left behind. Sperry ran forward swiftly, but carefully. Swift Lizard fired once and missed, and then Sperry was upon him.

Moonlight glinted from the knife of the wounded Comanche. Sperry dodged the blow and cracked the butt of his carbine against Swift Lizard's head. A moment later, he had rolled the Comanche over and had fastened his wrists behind his back with a thong he carried in his belt.

Harsh orders were coming from the post. Sperry knew the gate had been opened. Armed and mounted troopers were coming out with Sergeant Tim Mahoney at their head. Pursuit of the hostiles would be easy in the moonlight.

Chief Swift Lizard groaned and tried to sit up, and Jed Sperry helped him.

"So you're in trouble, Lizard," he said. "You're goin' to the post jail. Maybe you'll stretch rope, huh? You and your wild young men—not much good in a fight."

"Even Comanche cannot fight soldiers both in front and behind at the same time."

"Shucks! Nobody behind you but me. I made all that noise and did all that shootin'. They were only shootin' into the air inside the post to celebrate New Year's. You're a fool, Lizard. The trader, Baker, fooled you. He thought you'd come here and run into trouble and he'd be square 'cause you wouldn't trade with him."

"Swift Lizard will remember that!"

"Let me give you a tip, Lizard. I'll take you into the post. You tell the captain how Baker sent you a message by that Comanche who's always hangin' around. That way, you can be square with the trader, and it'll go easier with you. Huh?"

Sperry stood up and blew his bugle and yelled to attract attention, and Sergeant Mahoney rode madly toward him with a few of the men. Speaking quickly, Sperry reported what he had done. Mahoney's eyes glistened in the moonlight.

"Knew you had soldier stuff in you, Jed," he said. "This will please Sally, I reckon. . . . One of you men

catch up Sperry's mount and fetch it here! A couple of you catch up an Injun pony and put Swift Lizard on it and take him in. Another of you ride with Sperry. I'll catch up with the others."

So it happened that things worked out well, and Jed Sperry became a proper soldier, and was named post bugler when the old bugler's enlistment expired. And he got his corporal's stripes in time, after everybody was sure his reformation was sincere. And there was no further objection to his attentions to Sally Mahoney, least of all from Sally.

## TRAIL BLAZERS

(*Continued from Page* 10)

unfavorable for metallic ore prospecting from a geological standpoint.

Let's first summarize briefly the favorable conditions.

1. There should be igneous rock formations in the vicinity. These are rocks that have come from the interior of the earth, are of eruptive or volcanic origin, and solidified from a once molten state.

2. There should be other formations in the region also, formations that were cut into by igneous rocks, or between which the igneous rocks forced themselves at some distant time in the earth's geological history.

These essential, favorable conditions, for example, are found in the northern extensions of the Rockies and Coast mountain range well up into Alaska and Canada where there still exist many unexplored yet likely prospecting regions. Similar likely conditions exist in the mountains of Utah, Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, California, Idaho, Colorado, Oregon, Washington and the Black Hills of South Dakota. Though these latter broad, general areas in the West have been pretty well prospected (and have incidentally already produced billions in metallic mineral wealth) there is little doubt but that even today they contain many as yet undiscovered gold veins.

### The Plains Country

The generally unfavorable sections for gold lode prospecting in the West are mainly the wide reaches of prairie and plains country. This region can be checked off right away. There has been no igneous activity, or surface upheaval of deep-seated rocks

[*Turn Page*]


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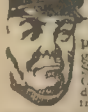

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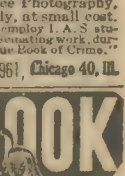

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there for ages.

Predominantly limestone country is not usually too favorable for gold lode prospecting.

However, if there are some igneous rock formations in the section, limestone country may be okay for lead and silver.

Areas overlain by a deep and heavy lava flow that have been undisturbed by earth readjustments for a long period of geological time are not much use either as far as the lode prospector is concerned. The lava blanket, however, may cover favorable formations. The catch is where to penetrate it, and how.

Getting down to details in searching for a gold vein don't forget that all small steep gulches in gold-bearing mountain areas are good places to start looking for float.

Begin at the mouth of the gulch and work across it. Then work across it again further upstream. Pan the stream gravels for free gold, or small lumps of float—gold-bearing vein rock, most frequently quartz. Also test pan the soil on the gulch slope at regular intervals.

Always keep a sharp eye out for vein outcrops in mineralized country. Sample them, particularly if they look promising. Then if you have along an iron mortar and pestle—you should if you are lode gold prospecting—grind small portions of the samples up and pan the ground material for free gold.

### The Gold Pan

The gold pan, a remarkably efficient prospecting tool, will save colors of free gold from crushed rock where the rock itself is only worth a dollar or so a ton—too lean for practical mining as a rule. And it will show a healthy feather or tail of gold particles in ore running from $15 to $20 a ton in free gold.

Good luck, anyway. There's a lot of lode gold still left in the West. All it takes is finding!

I'll be with you-all again next issue, folks.

—CAPTAIN RANGER

### IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

TOMBSTONE JONES was not musical, but at times he felt the urge to break into song. It had been a long, hard ride from Antelope City, with plenty heat added, but now the long shadows were stretching across the road to Gold Point, and Tombstone

Jones lifted his long nose to the sky and sang feelingly:

*"Swee-e-et bunch of da-a-a-a-zee-e-e-es,*
*Fresh from the dell.*
*Kiss me once, swee-e-et-heart;*
*Da-a-a-a-zee-e-e-es won't—"*

Whap! It was as though a hammer had struck the fork of his saddle, and from just beyond a high outcropping of granite on the grade, came the rattling report of a rifle.

Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith lost no time in conjecture; they simply fell off their horses, landing on their feet. Tombstone's horse, frightened, whirled, his rump striking Tombstone on the shoulder and knocking him over against the rocky wall of the grade. But even with this assistance from the whirling horse, Speedy was there first, and they went to their knees together.

The two horses recovered their composure and stayed put. A slab of granite blocked the view of the two men from down the grade.

"Peek out and take a look," urged Speedy.

[*Turn Page*]


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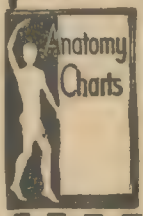


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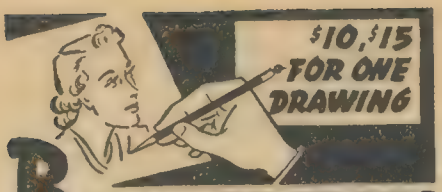


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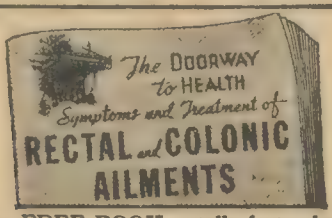


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"Peek out and do yore own lookin'," retorted Tombstone, rubbing his shoulder. "Curiosity ain't got the best of me yet."

"Next time—don't sing," advised Speedy. "I knowed yore voice was pretty bad, but I didn't think anybody'd shoot yuh for singin' out here in the open. Some music lover, I presume."

And so begins the hilarious new Tombstone and Speedy novelet, SECURITY IN SILVER RIVER, by W. C. Tuttle, to be featured in the next issue of EXCITING WESTERN.

When there is no further shooting and the boys finally venture from their point of cover, they find a dead man, and a live one, and a freight wagon.

"Holdup," explained the man with the wagon. "I'm drivin' freight for the Copa d'Oro mine. I can't figure why they'd want to hold me up, though. All I had was a wooden box full of ore samples. They clouted this feller ridin' with me over the head with a rifle barrel, took the box, and were jest startin' on their way when you fellows happened along. Then, after firin' at you, they hightailed it fast. And that's the whole story."

"That bullet they fired hit the fork of m'saddle," said Tombstone. "Is there any place where yuh can turn that wagon around? We've got to take this dead feller back to Gold Point."

"You ain't supposed to move a dead man," said Speedy. "He's a victim of murder, and the sheriff and coroner has got to see him jist as he lays."

"Yeah, I think yuh're right," agreed Tombstone, nodding. "Old timer, you just stay right here with him. We'll send the sheriff out as soon as we get to Gold Point."

"I don't like to set and look at a dead man," complained the driver. "It'll soon be dark, too."

"Set on the other side and look into the canyon," suggested Speedy. "See yuh later."


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After informing the sheriff of Gold Point of the holdup and murder, Tombstone and Speedy get a night's sleep. In the morning they learn that the man killed had been a detective working for the mine owning the ore box. Also, that there was a reward already posted for the return of said box and its contents which were, contrary to the wagon driver's statement about ore samples, staggeringly valuable.

Tombstone and Speedy were in Gold Point to investigate a rustling epidemic which had broken out in the surrounding rangeland, but never averse to making a few pesos on the side, decided to see if they could find the missing ore box and collect the reward for same.

And this search leads to a rollicking action scene that's only one of the many highlights in Tuttle's latest Tombstone and Speedy howl, SECURITY IN SILVER RIVER. And if you'll pardon the expression, we might add that it's a yarn to ride the Silver River with! A humdinger from start to finish!

There will also be another exciting, full-length Navajo Raine novelet by Jackson Cole in the next issue. Its title, YOU DUG YOUR GRAVE, RANGER, is indicative of the grim trouble Raine meets when he rides up into the Scalplock country of Arizona to pit his cunning and gun-skill against mine robbers and murderers of at least half a dozen men. It's a story that'll keep you reading rapidly from the first line to the last.

Also in our next issue of EXCITING WESTERN will be a true crime story of the old West, THE CASE OF THE CALICO DOLL, by Luther Locke. It concerns

[*Turn Page*]


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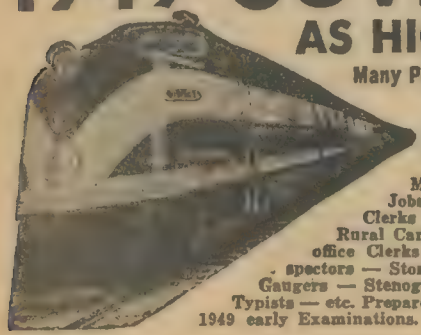

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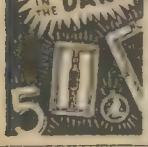

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the actual murder of a couple of prospectors, dramatically portrayed, and we're sure you'll find it one of the most interesting fact articles we've ever published.

Too, as an added feature, the next issue will contain more than the usual number of short stories. So for some rousing Western reading entertainment, look forward to the next big, colorful issue of EXCITING WESTERN!

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

NOW to a few excerpts from some of your many fine letters. And to those of you out yonder who haven't yet written us, we can only say that he who hesitates is lost. Not in a sense wherein you will need a compass to find your way to your favorite dispensary of cold drinks, perhaps, but lost to this department. For we could hardly be expected to publish your name if it is unknown to us, and an unwritten letter is really awfully hard to read, you'll have to admit. So how's about hearing from one and all of you pronto?

I read EXCITING WESTERN and think it is tops. Your Tombstone and Speedy stories are just right, a blend of plenty of excitement and some first class humor. I like all the stories, though, and the Navajo Raine series second only to that featuring Tombstone and Speedy. So just keep up the good work and I'll be more than satisfied.—*Cliff Buseman, Monroe, South Dakota.*

Gracias, amigo, for your kind words. Both of your favorites will be coming up in the next issue Cliff.

In your Westernaire, in the July issue, your second question regarding the famous Texas "gunman-lawman" who was accredited with using the first shoulder holster was misleading and in error, I'm sure, and so I muffed it. John Wesley Hardin was certainly a gunman, as Wild Bill Hickok would attest after backing down before him in Abilene one evening, but as for being a "lawman," I'm quite positive you'll find he was never listed in this category. In prison he did become a "lawyer," however.—*H. Colby Jones, Austin, Texas.*

Thanks, H., for pointing out our slip-up, and you are so right. Hardin never was a lawman, and in checking back we find that the original wording of our question contained the word "lawyer," but somewhere in the process of retyping, lettering, etc., became "lawman." Then, slipping past proofreaders, editors, et al, you got it in its garbled, misleading form. Our humblest apologies to you and everyone who may have missed the question as a result.

Tombstone and Speedy are tops, and though I read other Western magazines, none beats EXCITING WESTERN because of these two grand, humorous characters. As always, I will be looking forward to reading more about them in the next issue.—*Louise Beck, Fairburn, Georgia.*

And they'll be there in best laughable form in SECURITY IN SILVER RIVER, Louise, which is the title of their latest series of escapades featured in the next EXCITING WESTERN.

Of the Tombstone and Speedy stories I have read, I liked best: (1) BANDIT BUSTERS OF WAR DANCE, (2) THE GHOST OF SPOOK McGEE, (3) WHEN THE JOKER WENT WILD, and (4) THE TRAIL OF A SPOOK. Navajo Raine and Alamo Paige are also extremely good. My only suggestion is to give Paige a partner to help him out of tights he seems to always get into with owlhooters.—*Robert Hatherington, Kelliher, Sask., Canada.*

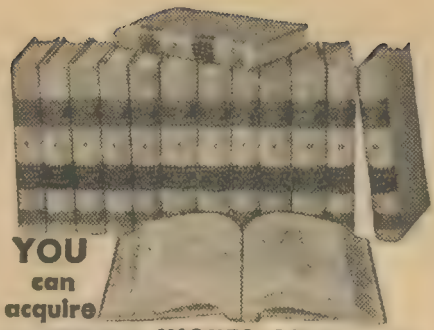
Pony Express riders were lone hands, Bob, and so in keeping with our policy of authenticity regarding the lives and occupations of old-time Westerners, we could hardly give him an aide.

Have just finished the September issue of EXCITING WESTERN which I enjoyed very much. Keep the Navajo Raine stories coming, also Tombstone and Speedy. As for the woman angles, keep playing them down as you've been doing. For them as likes love stories, let 'em read them elsewhere.—*Zane Green, Gage, Oklahoma.*

A regular misogynist, hey, Zane? Now don't get excited. Drop that hickory club, boy, because we didn't call you a bad name, really. Misogynist is just short for woman-hater. Anyhoo, we're kind of inclined to agree with you in a general sort of way, though of course we must remember that women played a great part in the conquest of the West.

And that does it for this issue, folks. Meantime, keep those swell letters coming our way, will you? We sure do enjoy them. Just address your letter or postcard to The Editor, EXCITING WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y. So long now till next time, and thanks to everybody.

—THE EDITOR

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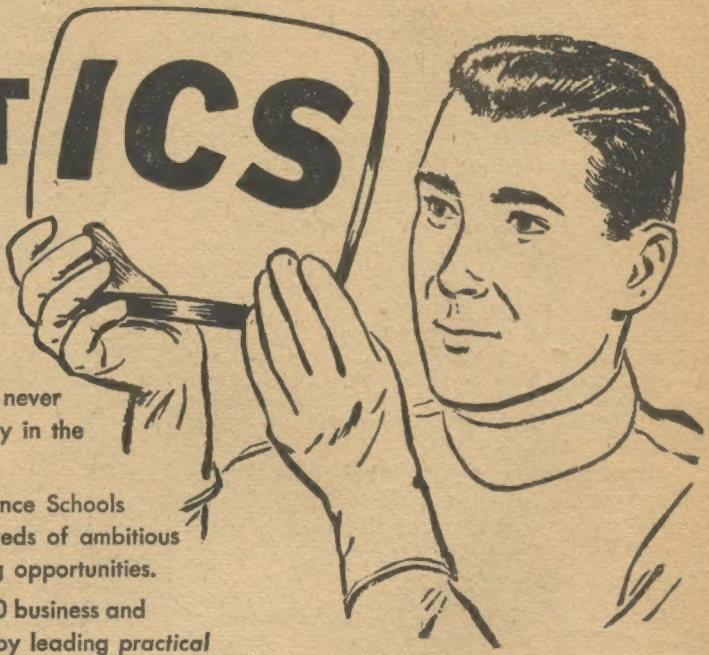

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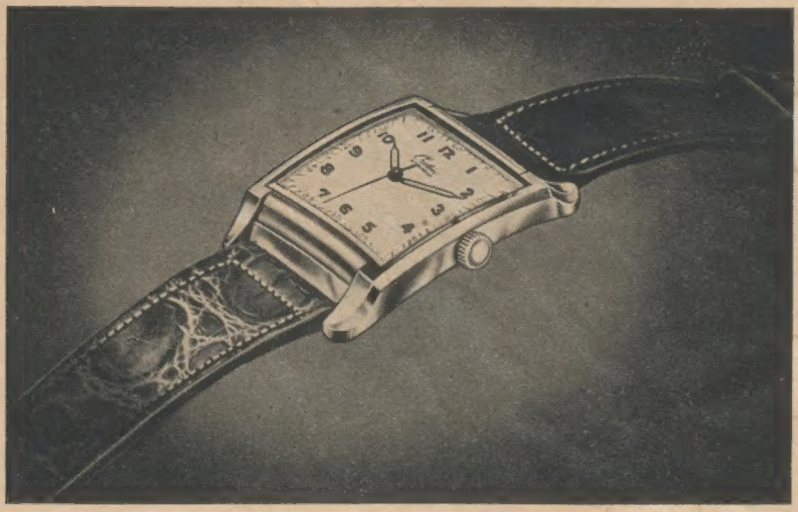

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